

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. On the left, a blue truck is partially visible, appearing to be on a path or road. The foreground is filled with dense, dark foliage, possibly ferns or similar plants. The overall tone is mysterious and slightly ominous, fitting the horror theme of the book.

屍鬼

SHIKI

小野不由美

一

新潮文庫

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sinnesspiel

Chapter 5

1

"Then, the three people in Yamairi died a natural death after all?"

Sumi said while changing his clothing in the room. Sumi had hurried in to serve as the staff for the overnight vigil and funeral services for Yamairi. Mitsuo, who was helping Sumi, gave a nod.

"Seems so. The Junior Monk said so."

Sumi lived in Mizobe. His home was a temple of the same sect, and Sumi was their second son. The number of parishioners was not terribly large, to the point where the head monk his father as well as his brother the assistant head monk his elder brother were able to hold side jobs as instructors, so they didn't particularly need Sumi's help. That was why he sometimes came and did part-time work as a monk here.

"Well, it's three of them, but all three were getting on in years."

"How old were they?"

"Just how old were they... I'm sure Gigorou-san was already about eighty or so, wasn't he?"

"Then, he enjoyed his longevity," Sumi sighed. "Our grandfather died at the age of sixty one, you know. My old man will be fifty six this year but, he's already complaining from morning to night that he hurts here and there, too."

"Yup, he lived a long, longevity filled life." Mitsuo forced a smile. "When you get near eighty, you're at the age for a peaceful death

but, more than anything it's how things went. Somehow it doesn't seem like it was a peaceful death. An unexpected death, that's what it feels like."

"That's true, no matter how you look at it, it leaves the impression of an untimely, sudden death."

"Well, it's three people so all of them being cleared away in one go is rare but, things like this do happen don't they."

They do, Sumi nodded as he draped the stole over himself. "At our parish, in one month, a house of four were taken out one after another."

"Four people. That's unusual."

"Of them one of them was already over ninety, a grandfather already in the hospital, but starting with his son just over forty who fell to a heart attack, following right after was his father, his grandfather, and his mother, making four people. Come to think of it, that was in the summer, too."

"I don't like it," Mitsuo shook his head. "The deaths continue on don't they. We've had Shuuji-san followed by those three. I hope it doesn't carry on with this kind of vigor, don't you?"

"Wasn't Gotouda Shuuji-san after them?" Sumi pointed out, making Mitsuo blink.

"Really? The first to actually die were the three people who died in Yamairi? Shuuji-san was drug along as the nephew, then?"

"Pulled in," Sumi mused as Ikebe popped his head in.

"Tsurumi-san has returned from the memorial service."

That's good, said Mitsuo with a smile.

"Somehow he was able to make it on time. I thought for sure he'd get held up. The old man Towada loves to talk, you know."

"So I've heard," Ikebe laughed, taking his own stole from where it

was hanged. "---It seems they finally moved in."

"Moved in?" Mitsuo blinked, Ikebe giving a somehow triumphant smile.

"Kanemasa. Last night---Ah, this morning, I guess. Anyway, the truck apparently came in the middle of the night."

"Well then."

In the middle of the night, asked Sumi with his eyes wide.

"They're some pretty strange people."

Mitsuo, seeming surprised again, gave a half nod. "You said it. --- And in the end, what kind of people were they, did they say?"

"It doesn't seem anyone's seen the master. Someone from Kami-Sotoba met with their help or some young part-time worker, though. They woke them up in the middle of the night, they said. To ask directions."

"Heh?"

"The full fleet was a big truck and two cars it seems. A grey four wheel drive and a white BM, it seems."

Mitsuo sighed and shook his head. Even now amongst the villagers the rumor mill was heavy with talk of the one who had his Meada Shigeki and ran having been the master of Kanemasa.

"What? Then, that foreign car didn't have any connection to Kanemasa after all did it."

"We cannot be sure, Mitsuo-san. After that, they may have changed cars."

"That's not something you can just do lightly." Mitsuo narrowed his eyes at Ikebe.

"Either way," laughed Sumi. "At today's all night vigil, the talk will be too loud for the sutras."

"You've said it. The number of condolence callers is going to increase exponentially."

Good grief, Sumi and Mitsuo thought as they exchanged looks. With this, the village would no longer be preoccupied with Yamairi. Having to go and hold an all night service and a funeral tomorrow, they'd determined that they would not be able to proceed with any austerity.

As if reading their minds, Ikebe laughed. "Well, is it so bad? I mean, weird rumors had been flying about the Kanemasa mansion. Whether there were signs of people's presence on the grounds, or that they'd heard voices groaning inside the gates. With this, the ghost-story like rumors will probably die out."

There's that, said Mitsuo sad forcing a smile, when heavy footsteps sounded Tsurumi's approach.

"Tsurumi-san, you have worked hard today."

Tsurumi lowered his head slightly to Mitsuo's voice, then surveyed the state of the room and glared at Ikebe.

"What is this, Ikebe, you've already spread it?"

"Of course I did! From left to right..."

"If you're supposed to be a monk, you cannot be so light lipped."

"A reticent monk can't do his trade, can he?"

"Well, there is that," said Tsurumi, said with a laugh. "By the way, the Junior Monk is?"

"I saw him speaking with Fuki-san," said Ikebe.

"He must be comforting her. Fuki-san has had so much misfortune herself. Her son and her brother, in succession like that."

"You said it. But, I wonder if the Junior Monk'll be okay without any sleep, too. I saw him before he left the temple, and his eyes were pure red."

Sumi lamented with a heavy breath of a sigh. "Another sleepless night?"

Looks like it, said Mitsuo with a forced smile.

"In the morning I recommended that he take a rest and at least entrust the morning ceremonies to Tsurumi-san and Ikebe-san though. With the memorial service today and the all night vigil, we all know how hard it is on him."

Really, Ikebe nodded.

"It's because the Junior Monk is diligent. Even though he could at least skip roughly a service or so."

Tsurumi knitted his brows. "Is there such a measurement as 'roughly a service or so'?"

"It's a figure of speech. He looked sleep deprived yesterday too, didn't he? Even though our schedule was so full."

"It's busy until Bon passes, isn't it. It'd be fine if he took a break from his side job at least during this season, but. Well, that business is like being a monk, even if you have spare time, you're never resting, in that trade."

"That's true."

While half listening to the conversation with Tsurumi and the others, Mitsuo spread out Tsurumi's clothes on the clothes rack. Tsurumi and Ikebe were officially the disciples of the head monk, Shinmei. During the four years while Seishin was in college, Ikebe entered into the services of this temple. Tsurumi had been at this temple since before Mitsuo had started coming. Both of them had more experience as monks than the assistant head monk Seishin, and Tsurumi was much older than Seishin. To hear talk of other temples, these kinds of situations could breed all sorts of discord but, the man in question, Seishin, was mild mannered in all he did and gave full dues to Tsurumi and Ikebe, and in return Tsurumi and Ikebe acknowledged that the assistant chief monk was earnest, so there weren't any particular problems.

He bowed his head formally to even Mitsuo who was no more than an extra hand at the temple, calling him "Mitsuo-san" each time and giving him his own dues. Though Seishin wrote novels, which in truth he didn't know if what he wrote was any good or not but he was never boastful of his side job, even while writing those novels he was crammed up in the office, so he left a good impression of not neglecting his duties.

In the end, it may have been because of the master of Tsurumi and Ikebe, the one who raised Seishin, Shinmei. ---Though he had no control of his limbs and was bedridden, even now the reverence to the head monk ran deep in the parish. Mitsuo himself was no exception.

"But it'd do him some good to relax a bit, in the Junior Monk's case." Ikebe took a breath that seemed like a sigh. "Like right now, even though getting even just a bit of rest would be good, he's been staying with Fuki-san for sooo long."

"He must be worried about Fuki-san," Sumi said with a smile. "The Junior Monk is a kind man."

Tsurumi nodded. "It's because that man is a monk at heart."

While Mitsuo was setting up the clothing, he nodded in his heart.

Since he was fifteen years old, Mitsuo commuted to the temple, supporting it from the shadows. Mitsuo himself certainly held no official, ordained post at the temple but, he thought of himself as a part of the temple and his love for it ran deep. The truth of it was that he felt that this temple was his own. Looking at it through the eyes of that Mitsuo who felt it his own, Seishin was a worthy heir to succeed the temple. Gentle and quiet, well mannered, his personality was clean and precise. His detached bearings suited the robes he wore well. He had no imprudent qualities like the successor of the Ozaki Hospital. Nor did he sneer at his father's profession. He found the saying that he was a monk at heart to be very appropriate. As a successor, there was not a single flaw to be found. ---exempting a single old scar.

"He really is," said Ikebe, his mouth distorting slightly. "So even

so, why're there people saying such weird things..."

Mitsuo blinked at Ikebe's tone that seemed to really warp the mood.

"Weird things?"

Realizing his verbal slip, he looked about at Mitsuo and the other's faces, voice raising up. "Ah, no, ...that's..."

"Weird things, what might you mean by that?"

"Earlier, I overheard a group that was standing around talking," Ikebe hesitated. "I mean, a little while ago, there was the incident where a foreign car hit a child. They were talking about whether that kind of car was actually there or not.."

"There or not, nothing," Tsurumi said, his eyes wide. "A child was hurt at the scene, wasn't he?"

"He was, but still. The Junior Monk was at the scene and wasn't he the one who had brought him to the hospital? So..."

Understanding what Ikebe was hesitating and finding so hard to say, Mitsuo nodded.

"Yeah. The Junior Monk was put up to it, if he put a story together with them, that kind of talk, right?"

Those rumors had made their way to his ears. Mitsuo worked together with the parishioners households, so he had an ear for their rumors.

"What do they mean by that," Tsurumi said, seeming to find it unthinkable.

"There are people saying that kind of thing. It isn't as if they mean anything bad by it, they're just irresponsibly letting their imaginations run wild. After all, see, the all-important culprit ultimately went uncaught. A bunch of rumors that it was really the Kanemasa car, hidden on their grounds were going around. It's a part of those rumors."

"Even so, the way it is being said..."

"I'm saying they don't mean anything bad by it. It was a freak accident that it turned into something this big, so maybe the Junior Monk might be covering for them, the neighbors are saying."

"What part of that doesn't mean anything bad?" Ikebe said indignantly. "That's bad will in itself! They should at least know the Junior Monk isn't that kind of---"

"Nowadays, the village isn't made up of just our parish, anymore," Mitsuo said lightly.

If they were temple parishioners, even with careless rumors they wouldn't imply that. At least, not where the temple had ears. In truth, when Mitsuo had heard those rumors he felt it was an insult to the parish itself.

"It just means there're folks who only know the Junior Monk through rumors." Mitsuo deliberately, carefully brushed the dust from Tsurumi's clothing. "On top of that, the Junior Monk might be a little too delicate in some ways. His side job's a little weird, so there're probably some people who have a few strange ideas about him."

As if grasping what Mitsuo was trying to say, Tsurumi gave a sound that seemed slightly like a groan. Ikebe and Sumi didn't seem to notice.

"Even so, Mitsuo-san."

"In the past, the village was all made up of parish families who supported the temple. They weren't just parishioners, way back in the day, the fields and the mountains and everything was borrowed land from the temple. That was all the more reason for the people to need a two-stone handicap allowance from the temple but the people who came in after that had nothing to do with any of that. Especially since the non-parishioners all came in in the post-war period, in new houses. Looking at it from those bunch's eyes, the temple's a self-important institution revered for no real reason," Mitsuo said, raising his face. Forcing a smile, he nudged Ikebe and

the others. "But more importantly, don't you have to be going? The over-night vigil is starting."

sinnesspiel



2

"Ritsuko-san, would you like to come to lunch with us?"

Isaki Satoko, pulling on her coat, poked her face into the treatment room.

"Today I brought my own lunch. Go on ahead!"

Then, we'll be going, said Satoko waving her hand along with Shiomi Yuki. Giving them a smile, Ritsuko cleaned up the area around the treatment bed. As she took stock of the remaining supplies, oh, she suddenly remembered that today was Wednesday. In the treatment room separated by one closed partitioning wall, Yasuyo was cleaning up. Ritsuko called to Yasuyo. "Yasuyo-san, have you seen the the Maebara Obaa-chan?"

Yasuyo was returning the changing bin to its place as she replied; "Maebara Setsu-san? No, I haven't!"

"I didn't think so."

Ritsuko sighed.

"Did something happen with Setsu-san?"

"She came on Saturday for her medicine. I couldn't give it without the doctor giving her an examination, so I told her to be sure to come on Monday, yet Monday and Tuesday both passed without her having come by, I was just thinking."

Yasuyo laughed out "Oh, it's because she hates injections. Well, it isn't like we can put a rope around her neck and drag her in, after all."

Yasuyo lightly patted Ritsuko who sighed 'That's true' as she headed out one step ahead of Ritsuko. Coming out of the meeting room into the hallway, she caught sight of Seishin peeking in through the side entrance.

"Oh my, Junior Monk."

Sliding open the partitioning door, Seishin politely bowed his head. "My apologies for interrupting you during the lunch hour but, the salve has run out and so I had come to ask for more. May I?"

Yasuyo laughed. "I don't mind at all. Please, come in. --How is the head monk? In this heat, he must be getting down."

"In spite of the heat he is well. It does not seem his appetite has declined."

"My, that's good to hear. It must be because of the Madame taking such fine care of him." Yasuyo went towards the waiting room.

"Come in. I'll bring you some tea in a minute."

"Please don't fuss over me. ---Ah, and we do not have much of the vulnerary cover remaining, but..."

Yes, yes, Yasuyo nodded as she knocked on the waiting room door.

"Doctor, the Junior Monk is here."

"Ou," came a careless voice from within. Yasuyo opened the door; inside, Toshio was facing the desk buried in a pile of books.

"If you will wait just a minute. In the mean time, please soothe the doctor down. All day long, his mood's been off."

Leaving behind the wryly smiling Seishin, Yasuyo returned to the hall. Toshio raised his face from the book, cigarette still in his mouth.

"I can't believe it. My own nurse is talking crap about me like that just out of the blue."

Seishin smiled, refraining from commenting.

"And? I'll tell you in advance, if you're here about how they finally moved in, it's a popular time for it."

Told that as soon as he entered the waiting room, Seishin blinked.

"What, that wasn't what you were here for? ---It's that house. Seems like a moving truck came, didn't it?"

"Aa---seems so."

"Thanks to that business's been unusually booming today with people coming in with idle gossip. No, booming as usual, I should be saying, huh?" On the desk before Toshio was a thick, large sized open book. "That someone saw a truck, about what kind of car it was, that the storm doors were open and they saw some curtains. I'm sure from all that that since this morning the hill's been crammed with sight seers."

Seishin gave a light smile, 'I see.'

"What I can't believe is that it's been no small number that left their front row seats to come all the way here to tell me about it. If they

wanna gawk, they could just stay there until the master comes out for the curtain call but no. For some reason they all have to come in here, are they formally reporting the minutes to me or something? Do they think I've got any interest in that kind of thing? The whole bunch of them..."

Seishin didn't say anything in particular. Nor was Toshio really expecting a response, so Seishin knew from years of association with him.

"The Master of the house still hasn't shown himself it seems. The owner's particulars are unknown. It seems their name's Kirishiki but, there's no sign of them putting up a nameplate on the gate. Their cars are a white foreign car and the servant has one wagon-like car. Sorry to say, the old lady that came to report that didn't seem to know the make and model. They have duplex curtains, and you can see a lamp by the window, and then---what else was there?"

"I get it." Seishin ceased to force a smile. In these situations he knew of the villager's burning curiosity all too well.

"Telling me to stop must mean you didn't come to hear about this. ---So, what's up?"

"Father is out of his ointment. Also, vulnerary covers."

Toshio gave a large exhale of cigarette smoke and leaned back deeply in his chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"Wonderful. We're back around to the everyday again, in other words."

"What are you pouting about?"

"Why the hell would I be pouting?"

Seishin smiled and shook his head.

"Did any more reports come in after that about Yamairi?"

The other day, when he had come to ask about it, Toshio had said that they were still waiting on part of the results.

"I'm happy to report it was a perfectly normal response," Toshio laughed. "It's still not complete but, it seems they've arrived at that conclusion one way or another."

"Acute liver failure?"

"For Old Lady Mieko, yeah. The police didn't think it was a death caused by anything external either, but that said there's no mention of any infectious diseases or anything, so they probably want to wrap it up as neatly as they can."

"I see..."

"But damn, there's something messed up about the people here. They *do* know that in Yamairi three people, *three*, died? I wonder if it's the time to be sticking their neck into the livelihoods of some move-ins. The bunch of them wanted to ask about this and that until yesterday, then a truck comes and it's like whatever about that."

"Everyone thinks of it as someone else's problem."

"That's exactly what it is. But, everyone can die. Like there's such thing as a death that's just someone else's problem," Toshio said breathing a sigh. "When a dead body was found, a fuss kicked up like some kind of festival. No matter how much I try to research the real cause of death, they want to pervert it into a forced double suicide. Or do like the Itou's Ikumi-san and stretch to call it a curse or black magic. It's so serious, it's so serious, they say, they make a face like their own fate is sure to be caught up in it too but, something that serious, important, is just something that gets forgotten in the face of one house, one move-in."

Seishin gave a forced smile. "Everyone is bored. Change is something they welcome. They know it themselves, that really it's nothing at all. Rather, it's precisely because they know that that they're getting what pleasure they can from it to stave off their boredom."

Good grief, Toshio breathed a sigh. Of course, what Seishin had noted was something that Toshio already knew.

As Seishin moved to leave after receiving the medicine, Toshio again took up his medical bag and stepped out of the hospital. Seishin gave him a dubious look, causing Toshio to turn a challenging eye to him as he stepped out of the back entrance.

"I have to check on the Gotouda Baa-san's condition, don't I? After all she's still got the funeral after this. She's at that age and all, and then there's this heat, she looked like she was being done in,"

Toshio said, thrusting a finger at Seishin. "So I'm telling you, don't get the wrong idea that I'm some volunteer doctor overflowing with compassion. I just want to see if there's any need for medical treatment for one of my patients, just so you know."

Seishin's wry smile slipped out despite himself. As he stepped onto the Maruyasu saw mill lumber yard, Toshio's voice rose; 'whassis?' Following his line of sight, on there was a person walking along the road on the edge of the hospital grounds. His age was approximately mid-twenties, and he took notice of Seishin and the

other man, suddenly smiling and bowing his head.

"I finally found someone. ---Excuse me, where am I?" the young man asked brightly. Toshio stood in shock as the man approached.

"Let me guess, I think you're someone from the Kirishiki family, but."

"I am. Nice to meet you."

"In that case, keep going down this road until you come to another one. Take a right turn onto it and then if you go right again you'll be at the bottom of the slope."

Ah, that's it, the young man mumbled. "I am sorry for having troubled you. ---Ozaki-san, isn't it?"

Toshio raised a brow; the man looked towards the building beside the road.

"I had seen the two of you coming out of there towards here. This is the Ozaki Hospital, isn't it? And I see that only one of you happen to be in a white coat and carrying a medical satchel."

Toshio looked to Seishin. "Looks like we've had a master detective move in, oi." He said, then to him. "As you have most brilliantly deduced, I am Ozaki. Technically I'm something of a doctor so if something happens, by all means. If you can call me while there's still work for me to do, I'd appreciate it. If there's no part for me, it'll be him you're going to."

He tilted his head. "Is this gentleman also a doctor?"

Seishin shot a glare at Toshio's joke, but Toshio flippantly laughed it off.

"Nah, he's a monk."

Ah, Tatsumi laughed. "I see, you, sir, are from the temple atop the mountain! I am called Tatsumi."

"I am Muroi."

Toshio invited Tatsumi in, opening the gate of branches they had just come through. "Well, how about some tea at least? You don't wanna stand around here getting bitten by the bugs, right?"

"But, your house call?"

"What're you saying. It's not like I was called out specifically. The people here seem to like the monk better than me, so I just thought I'd try to cut in before the monk's turn, that's all. I've got time.

Besides," Toshio laughed. "I don't have enough burning curiosity to go sightseeing when someone moves in but, now that I've finally met someone who lives there, I'm not devoid of curiosity enough to just see him off without a word."

For some reason the big mass of people that gathered made me nervous, Tatsumi said. "It isn't that I hate it in particular but, somehow I'm not sure just how to handle them."

Opening the sliding dust door to the waiting room, Seishin and Tatsumi knelt down. Toshio sat down on the ground cross legged, lining up the three glasses of barley tea on the tray brought in before by the surprised looking nurse Ritsuko.

"There's no other entertainment in this village. They'll be treating you like rare breeds for a while. It'd be best to keep that in mind." I see, Tatsumi laughed. "I thought I would go investigate what the village has and doesn't. So, I went out the back door and walked along a slim path that didn't seem to have anybody on it. I thought that if I followed it around far enough it would come out to the village, but."

"It's not that it doesn't come out at least. Actually, this is right where it comes out at."

"Ah, then, it was good that I had taken that road."

"The road that goes in front of your place, that one's a woodland path that eventually goes up the mountain. It doesn't go anywhere in particular, it just disappears into the mountain. If you go down the side road, it comes out at the back of the paddy fields at the back of the sawmill. You'll just come to some foot paths between the fields but, it is in fact a road."

Tatsumi bit back a smile. "Indeed, it is."

"Country roads are a mix of forest paths and farm roads and paddy field roads and all that. Well, you'll get used to it quick. As long as you don't go over the ridges, no matter where you walk from where, you'll end up in the village.

"That is a positive point, isn't it!"

"Let's set aside that kind of flattery. It's not exactly good or bad, it's just the country. What're you doing, moving all the way out here to the country like this. ---From now on, you're going to be asked this by everyone here and there, so it'd be better to prepare your answer."

Tatsumi gave a simmering smile. "It was not my decision, so, maybe I should say that I do not know, myself."

"That won't fly. Aren't you a member of the Kirishiki household too?"

"If you mean that I live in their house. But, I am but a simple servant."

Heh, Toshio blinked. "You're not family? I was sure Tatsumi sounded like a first name, but."

Tatsumi smiled lightly. "Kirishiki Tatsumi, eh---Not bad at all. But, Tatsumi is my surname. I am but a simple live-in servant. I'm in charge of physical labor or perhaps you'd say the general handiman."

"Mind if I ask about the family set-up?"

"There is the Master, the Madame, and the young lady. You could say the Master is retired. He was formerly the president of a company but just last year he retired."

"And on to a life of dignified luxury? That's an enviable story. How old's Kirishiki-shi?"

Saa, Tatsumi tilted his head. "I've not formally asked him but about his mid-forties, I think?"

"That's young. For retirement, I mean."

"So it is. The likes of myself wouldn't know the intricacies of the situation but, if I hazard a guess, it might be that a current stock holder who inherited his shares can't do much with the company. It's just, the reason that he made such a sudden decision was for the Madame, his wife and the young lady, his daughter. This may be related to why they had moved but, the two of them are quite frail."

"An illness is it?"

"Yes. That is why it was best to seek a peaceful, quiet place to move to. And, as there had been nobody living on this property, the asking price was fair, I'm told."

"I get it. ---This is something I'm asking more out of a sense of obligation as a doctor than out of curiosity but, what's wrong with his wife and daughter?"

"Are you familiar with SLE?" Tatsumi said, Toshio making an unusually serious expression.

"I know it. ...I see, that's tough." Perhaps sensing that Seishin was tilting his head at least in his thoughts, Toshio explained. "It's a type of incurable disease. There's a skin affection, joint pain, and then kidney and heart failure too, wasn't there? I know there's light sensitivity, too, isn't there?"

"That's right," Tatsumi nodded. "That is why, when they do go out from time to time, they are heavily dressed in hats, coats, and gloves. Especially on summer days like this, yes? But, being in the city, that's painful. Even though there are so many places to go out to, they cannot go out as they'd like. So it may have been better to

move out to someplace where there was nothing at all to do, to live in quiet peace in the house, but, my, how rude of me."

Toshio laughed. "That's just how it is."

"And for some time now, I believe the master had wished to withdraw. Where we were, various matters were piling in and weighing on him, leading to such a decision, I'm sure. Passing on the company, sorting out business. It's just, he does so love his house, so."

"So he had it reconstructed. I see, if it wasn't for those circumstances, he probably wouldn't move out to the sticks like this."

But, Tatsumi said. "It is indeed a small place but, it seems to be to everybody's liking. The Lady is very happy that there's a hospital. Although, we do have a doctor, but."

"A doctor? In the house?"

"Yes. He is an elderly gentleman called Ebuchi-san, but. He passed on his hospital to his son and had retired some time ago. The gentleman sees to the care of the Madame and the young lady. He doubles as the young lady's home-tutor in a way as well, kind of."

"How old's the young lady?"

"She is thirteen. Technically she would be a first year middle school student but, with her illness, school is generally, well, you know."

Yeah, Toshio mumbled.

"But, even if we have a doctor, it isn't as if we have the equipment. If she suddenly takes a turn for the worse and her illness becomes a matter of life and death, it's reassuring to have a hospital so nearby. Actually, when we'd heard from Takemura-san that there was a hospital here, it seems the decision to move was sealed."

"That's a heavy responsibility on me," Toshio said with a strained smile. "I'll take care to study up."

"We'll be depending on you."

"Then, there's the three in the family, you the servant, a doctor, summing up to five people?"

"There's one housekeeper. A sum of six people."

Hmm, Toshio hummed as Seishin looked to his wristwatch and stood.

"Then, I must be going. I have work to do."

Toshio explained to Tatsumi who looked up questioningly. "We had a death in the village. So he'll have to head off to the funeral. On the way to saying my condolences, I thought I'd stop in on the

surviving younger sister. She is an old girl, she's sure to be feeling down."

Well then, said Tatsumi standing up quickly. "My apologies. Keeping you caught up in talk."

"It's fine. If you're all right with this kind of cheap tea, come in to drink again."

Thank you, Tatsumi said bowing his head. He showed a very cheerful smile as he spoke. "I'll have to be getting back too! Sorry again for the intrusion!"

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3

"Hey, Tatsu-san. Yesterday, a young'un from Kanemasa appeared at the Ozaki Clinic, did you hear?" said Satou Oitarou as he approached.

Every day for ten years straight just like so, Tatsu sat at her shop front and gazed at the village road. The weather was the same as usual. The road top's reflection was dazzling.

"The young'un from Kanemasa. ...I wonder if that wasn't the young'un who asked directions at Chigusa?"

"Wasn't it, I wonder. Going by the rumors, it looks like he's the only young man they have."

Oh, Tatsu gave a curt reply and returned to watching the village road. It wasn't that she had no interest in the move-ins. If she showed her interest candidly, Oitarou was the type to become stingy with information. Just the opposite, if she kept it short, he would just spit out everything that he knew, so she knew from experience.

As expected, Oitarou took up the seat nearest Tatsu, leaning his body forward. "So it seems, they have the man, his wife and their daughter, a three person family. They say the wife and daughter's bodies are weak. So that is why they ended up moving to the country, it sounds like. The young'un, a helper girl, and a doctor are there it sounds like. He's their personal family physician."

"Heeh..."

Talk about extravagance. It made sense, they had enough to

dismantle and rebuild a house like that one. But, Tatsu didn't like it. More than anything, in the first place, she wondered why they moved in in the middle of the night. And she heard it was a truck and two passenger vehicles. That was probably the lot that had come to move in during the mushiokuri.

(but, if so I wonder why they turned back, then.)

She wasn't satisfied. That wasn't all. Now that they'd moved in, the owner hadn't shown himself, and she didn't like that either. There were rumors he'd been sighted but Tatsu herself and all of the old people who gathered there had never laid eyes on him. Moving in in the middle of the night was bad enough, as if trying to avoid her notice, which was plain boorish of them. If they had moved to their new house in the middle of the day, they would have had to enter the village by passing by her post before Takemura. And then, going out to the obvious house, someone out of the old folks who had too much time to spare would have met them. If that happened, that someone would come straight here and fork over the news, and yet..! Tatsu had always done like this, sitting here as she did and yet she was well informed about everything relating to the village. And yet when it came to the man of the house at Kanemasa, they managed to slip out beyond her line of sight.

(I don't like it....)

Oitarou might have felt the same way, somehow making an unamused expression.

"What's with them, the bunch from that house, being so sneaky, anyway."

"It isn't as if they're being particularly sneaky, really."

"You think? It sure feels like it, don't it? Voice unheard, sight unseen, doesn't it feel like that to you, Tatsu-san?"

It feels exactly like that, Tatsu thought but did not respond. With a sulking expression, Oitarou wiped at the sweat that rose up. As he did, a smile bearing ill will rose on his face.

"Well, with this we know that Ikumi-san's weird predictions were off. That girl said that the master had some bad fortune and couldn't move in, or something like that, she was saying. Right about now there's probably no end to her embarrassment, I bet she's regretting it."

Tatsu furrowed her brows.

"She was just using guesswork to say whatever she wanted, to hear herself talk. To start with whatever comes out of her mouth is random anyway, so it was all incoherent enough to start with."

"Hahaa."

"She'll miss the mark and miss it again, then she'll make up some more as if she's not embarrassed at all, make with whatever weird connections to it all just pop into her head, that's how her mind works."

No mistaking it, Oitarou laughed.

Natsuno was rummaging in the refrigerator when his mother and father returned from the workshop. Time for their break, Natsuno wondered, looking at the kitchen clock.

"What, having a between meal snack?" Azusa asked, poking her head into the kitchen. Not really, said Natsuno, taking out the bottle of barley tea.

"Bring us some, too."

Yeah, yeah, Natsuno mumbled. He took out three glasses from the cupboard and poured the tea.

"While you're there, bring the grapes too. --Hey, Natsuno-kun, did you hear the talk about the move-in?"

"No. Someone moved in?"

"Looks like it. Before, one of the people I ran into passing through the neighborhood came to report about it."

Hnn, Natsuno murmured, washing the grapes and putting them on a plate. He set it out on the dinning table. His mother who sat waiting in her chair asked him to put ice in it, sending him back with the glass.

"You can do it yourself."

"You're up, aren't you? Please."

Breathing out one sigh, Natsuno put the ice in as his dad washed his hands beside him.

"There's a big fuss in the village. Even though it's just someone moving in, I've got to wonder if it's worth all that big a deal."

Azusa laughed. "What, don't you think it's kind of cute, in a childish way. I'm sure when we moved in, it was like this too, I bet."

"I bet," Yuuki sighed. "Even so, until just a little while ago, they were making a fuss about the incident in Yamairi. Now that someone's moved in, that's all there is."

"They's just simpleminded. Isn't it more charming like this? It's less of a crime than talking about Yamairi."

Well yeah, Yuuki said sitting in a chair. "It was a freak, it was a forced double suicide, the theories were flying, just how big of an incident did they expect to have happened?"

"And in the end it was a natural death wasn't it,at Yamairi."

"Sounds like that's what the doctor of the Ozaki's is saying. That man did stand in on the autopsies."

"Then there's no doubt about it is there. Finding three dead bodies at once would whip everyone up, I understand that but it wasn't worth that much of a fuss, was it."

"Well they did think it was a major incident. Three people found dead isn't something you'd call ordinary. Yamairi was isolated in the mountains. The three inhabitants were all elderly. Those old people were decimated and nobody noticed. The bodies were never even

discovered until things got to that point. I mean, a villager tried to go by to report on the death of another family member when the body was found, but if that hadn't happened, just when would they have been found?"

"That's true..."

"Even in a village with as many old people as this one, this is the extent of their preparations. I think this is a problem, don't you? I think that there should be more of a network to protect the elderly. Even in a village full of nothing but old people, the elderly are still isolated. Seen as unnecessary, their relationship to the people around them dwindles gradually, and they end up alone. If you don't take part in society, you won't be reached by its protections."

"There is something like that. An elderly association or some network of lonely old folks."

"This proves that it was insufficient."

That's true, Azusa nodded.

"I think that what happened in Yamairi is something, is several somethings to think about. Well, for the villagers, it's something already done and over though. Despite being a collective community, things are unexpectedly flippant."

"That's true. I thought it'd be more----should I say substantial, the connections between people."

"Well, Yamairi has geographic factors to it as well. Even so, I'm not sure what to think about it being passed over just because people are moving in."

"Doesn't it depend on who it is moving in? At any rate, they did reconstruct a house like that, they moved in in the dead of night, they're quite showy. They were made to be talked about."

"That said, I haven't heard anything about them showing themselves."

"Oh but it sounds like there are people who have seen them. I've

heard little rumors that someone had."

"I wonder about that, too." Yuuki once again sighed. "Now that they've finally moved in, I'd think they would want to at least greet the people nearby, but. They did take the trouble to move all the way out into a small collective like this. I don't know what I think about that kind of behavior, cloistering themselves up as if to ignore their own surroundings."

"That's true..."

Listening to Azusa's murmur, Natsuno washed out the glass he had used. Just as he'd quietly started out of the kitchen, his father's voice called to him, asking if he was going out.

Yeah, replied Natsuno without turning around. "I'm going to the Mutous'."

As usual, outside the weather was annoyingly sunny. Walking while being awash in the sun's rays, a disconcerted Natsuno thought to himself, what the hell?

The old people of Yamairi were isolated. It was true enough that they were cut off from any network. There was nobody left in regular contact with them, nor anyone who visited them. That was just why three people, three dead people, weren't found until they were already dead.

But, the old people had to consent to being isolated themselves. They must have understood that they had ended up in a condition of isolation, and they must have been only all too aware that they were also geographically isolated. They should have also understood what might have happened being in advanced age. In spite of all that, they decided to stay in Yamairi.

If they were afraid of isolation, they should have taken steps so as not to be isolated. Just as Azusa was saying, there was an organization for the elderly in town, and a network so that the old people living alone could watch over each other in their daily lives. If they feared solitude, they could have proactively been a member of that, and in not doing as much, the old people in Yamairi

knowingly choose their isolation. If the people themselves didn't wish for isolation, regardless of whether they were trying to make contact with society or not, then if they couldn't, it'd be a problem. But that was only one possibility. The other was that this was the old people's will.

He understood his father's ideals but he didn't understand the reason why other people should have to embrace and worry about people who had no personal desire to escape isolation. Overall, his disagreements with his father were of that nature. If the person themselves chose a lonely life, the results, as inconvenient as they may be, were consented to and accepted. Shouldn't they have known, Natsuno thought. It wasn't as if the old people didn't know themselves that they were isolated, and if perhaps they never realized the dangers inherent to it, regardless, they didn't make any moves to sweep away that isolation or its dangers, --or possibly in the one in a million chance they just never really thought about it, then it would still mean that those people themselves were just fools. He couldn't understand why others should have to swarm them and worry about them.

"...It's not any of your damn business."

That was how Natsuno felt. If you wanted to live like a fool and die like a fool, have at it. That was the person in question's freedom of choice. To say nothing of the fact that the old folks may have been fully aware all of that, and that still they may have chosen as they did, so he thought. Three isolated old people's bodies were destroyed, and it may have been strange that they didn't seek any outside assistance but, as mysterious as it was that the old people sought no help---the reason may have been that the old folks already felt as if the people living in the village called Sotoba were like complete strangers---that was a view he'd never heard uttered.

(Even that house.)

Natsuno's feet stopped. He turned around and looked at the majesty of the Kanemasa mansion in the middle of the green slope.

Whether he wanted to give his greetings or not, wasn't that up to the inhabitants too, he felt. If one had the freedom to move out into

the country seeking territorial bonds and proactively mingling with the villagers, then one also had the freedom to move only seeking a quiet environment, the freedom to refuse annoying and troublesome assistance.

(How to put it...)

He was convinced justice and good sense were always on his side, that was the impression Natsuno always had from his father. While calling himself an advocate and protector of freedom and human rights, his father was indifferent towards his son's free will. Natsuno had no such privileges as taking to any conduct his father deemed a "folly." Natsuno had to wonder if his father at least had an understanding of the way he himself invalidated Natsuno's own free will so forcefully.

With a heavy sigh he stepped onto the Mutou family property. Before he could peek inside from the veranda, a voice came down from above.

"Yo."

From the second story window, Mutou Tamotsu waved his hand. With a nod he let himself in and went up the steps. Tamotsu's room was boiling with hot air hanging heavy in the room, and with Tohru and even Murasako Masao there, the population density was high. All of them had stripped the upper half of their bodies, dripping with sweat; it was indeed sultry.

"What is this, a sauna."

Tamotsu laughed at Natsuno's complaint.

"Hygienic, isn't it? Be thankful, you. In the city, they pay good money to go to the sauna."

"Is there anyone who'd pay to come to a run down sauna like this? The competition's stiff out there."

"Punk," Tamotsu said giving Natsuno a light kick. "That reminds me, you heard?"

Seeing Tamotsu's excitement, Natsuno sighed. "Kanemasa, right. Looks like they moved in."

How old a story is that, Tamotsho laughed. "That's two day old talk now, isn't it? Your news isn't the freshest. ---Not that, yesterday, they came to Masao's place."

"They came?"

Masao looked somehow triumphant as he smiled. "The younger one from Kanemasa. He showed his face in our shop. He came to ask if we do deliveries."

Natsuno let out a faint sigh. Masao's house was a rice shop. It wasn't strange that someone who'd moved in would come to ask that.

"You're so grateful they came in that you're bragging about it?"

Masao's expression became sullen. "It's not like I was bragging about it."

"Really?" Natsuno took a spot by the window, resting his chin on the window still. "You're really starved for a topic. Like the fuss over Yamairi. People getting old and kicking the bucket, people who just moved in showing their faces, are those that unusual?"

Masao's mouth twisted at Natsuno's irritated tone.

"Well sorry. For being so country."

Masao's words were turned back at him.

"That you've got a complex like that about it is proof you're country."

Masao fell further into a sulk but Tamotsu waved his hand laughing that there was no doubt about it. What are you laughing about, you're being made fun off, why aren't you mad, Masao said with a glare at Tamotsu's happy go lucky face. Tohru and Tamotsu were always like this. That's why Natsuno could be so arrogant. He was a person of Sotoba now too, so he should be educated in how

things went in Sotoba, but no.

"You act like you're older than me or something."

You're impertinent for being younger than me, was what Masao had meant to imply but, Natsuno's response was curt.

"It's just that you're a bratty kid."

Masao glared at Natsuno. He somehow repressed his desire to yell. Because he was like this, because he was so unpleasant, Masao thought secretly clutching his fist as he stood. Tamotsu looked up at him, still with a happy go lucky expression. "What's up? Going to the bathroom?"

"I'm going home. The air's gone bad."

Masao glanced at Natsuno. He took his shirt and headed out of his room with loud footsteps. Natsuno watched his back as he left.

"What the hell is with that guy."

Tohru forced a smile. "It's because you wouldn't get on board with Masao's bragging."

"It's just talk about how he saw the move-ins, so why should I have to listen to him like it's a treat to hear it?"

"That's what they call getting along. Even if you're not interested, you pretend like you are at least. If you're like that from here on, when you're out in the world it's going to be a hard time."

"It's my hard time so leave it alone. And? The guy who glares and makes an exit when someone won't get on board with his boasting won't have a hard time?"

Tohru pushed against his forehead, giving an inappropriate laugh. "Well, he'll have problems, too. Masao's got something spoiled about him. Any time something not too fun happens, he gets like that."

"...Hn."

"He's the youngest of his siblings. And his older brother has a pretty big age difference on him. He's what you'd call a Child of Shame."

"How old was Munetaka-san again? Isn't he already in his mid thirties? There's not too much of a difference between him and the second brother, so it's about a fifteen year difference, isn't there?"

"It's sixteen," Tamotsu interjected. "So he was always coddled by his mom. Though, his mother's died. But that's why he doesn't like it when things don't go his way."

"How stupid can you get?"

"Yeah, well." Tohru forced a smile. "In the first place things are distorted when you compare him to them. The first two sons of that house turned out great. If you compare them, he comes off pretty menial, doesn't he? And on top of that, Masao was raised spoiled, he doesn't have the magnanimity to accept that comparison head-on."

"No, I meant the excuses Tohru-chan's giving for him are idiotic."

"Oi, oi."

"He's selfish because he's an only child or he was spoiled because he was the youngest or whatever, those're the prevailing explanations. Are you saying anyone raised in the same circumstances would definitely turn out like him? Humans are individuals, you know. Cutting that to as minimal as you want and ignoring the individual to wrap them up in some image is stupid, is what I'm saying."

Now come on, you, Tamotsu sighed. "Aren't we always backing you up? While we casually follow Masao's lead, we're also supporting you. That's what they call tact."

"You sure you don't mean 'talking behind someone's back'? I don't need such a petty ally."

".....Hey, you, keep up that attitude and one of these days someone's going to knife you."

"If there's somebody with the guts to do it, bring it on."

Honestly, Tohru laughed. Putting aside whether Natsuno's was right or wrong, the fact that he could casually fire off things like that was what made Natsuno Natsuno.

Natsuno looked to the window, disinterested. His line of sight fell ahead to the Kanemasa mansion. "What did they move out here for, anyway. ...Just curious."

He said it as if talking to himself.

"Something like the wife and the daughter have health problems, it seems like. So they moved out into the country, Masao was saying before."

So that's it, Natsuno said with a sigh. "If it weren't for that, who'd come here."

While he one-sidedly understood their reason, he felt a hint of loneliness. Natsuno didn't have any reason like that. There were neither territorial nor blood ties, there was no reason at all that he had to enter into the village's social sphere. But, his parents decided, and that was that. There was not one single reason for Natsuno to be here. Yet he was caught in Sotoba, and its curse grew stronger with time. Somewhere in him he harbored the feeling that if he didn't shake it off, he would never get out of Sotoba.

"Too bad huh, that they won't be your allies."

As if he'd been seen through, Natsuno wore a severe scowl. "It's not like I wanted friends in particular. ---Tohru-chan, you're pretty calm. Guess it's to be expected of an adult?"

"That's not really it or anything. I just mean it's got nothing to do with me, that house."

"Hnn?"

"Living in a house like that and all, they're probably eccentrics. I can't picture being able to get on with them like easy going

neighbors, and in the first place I don't really think I'd want to mingle with them either. It'd be one thing if they had a girl the right age, but they say the daughter's about thirteen or somewhere around there."

"That's your real goal, huh."

Tohru laughed. "It doesn't seem like they've got any interest in knowing us either, and I don't really want to know them especially. In the future there probably won't be anything we'll meet over. So, they don't have anything to do with me at all."

Natsuno laughed. "That's true enough."

"Say, the one who saw the person from Kanemasa first, wasn't that you, Kanami-san?"

Kanami sighed and wondered how many customers had come through the entrance saying that. Tanaka Sachiko and Shimizu Tsuruko who had entered took their places at the counter, eyes expectant as they stared at Kanami. She understood their expectations but since yesterday she'd told the same story how many times? Enough already, Kanami was fed up.

Losing to Sachiko and Tsuruko's stares, Kanami summed up that the inhabitants of Kanemasa asked her for directions. At her side as she spoke was Motoko, who she knew was tensing up. Motoko was uneasy. The feeling that outsiders had come made her cower into herself.

When did Motoko start showing such worry for her children that bordered on neurosis? She had a feeling she hadn't always been this way. At least, when she'd left the village, when she'd seen her off to live the married life in town, Motoko hadn't been like this. Since they had only talked on the phone now and then, not seeing each other as constantly as they did now, maybe it just didn't show on the surface. But, when she'd first divorced and returned to the village, she couldn't help thinking she hadn't been like that, either. When did that start, and through the years didn't it seem like it was becoming more serious?

While Sachiko and Tsuruko were goading and teasing out more details with no small effort, Motoko finished her washing and looked up to the clock. She quickly removed her apron and folded it up. "Well then... I have dinner preparations to make."

Kanami smiled and nodded, calling out see you later. Motoko's face was implacably stiff, and she only returned the nod.

Watching Motoko leave the store, Kanami turned back to Sachiko and Tsuruko. "Don't talk so much about Kanemasa around her! Motoko gets anxious about them."

Oh my, Tsuruko said, her eyes widening. "Anxious about them--- what do you mean?"

Kanami hesitated. Explaining Motoko's unease was going to take time and effort.

"Because," Kanami smiled. "Just a while back, Motoko's child was in a hit and run, you remember. It wasn't a big deal but there were rumors that that car was the Kanemasa car, you know."

"Well, dear me."

"Of course it's just a rumor, and they didn't move into Kanemasa around that time. But, if he'd been hit worse, it could have become something much more serious. It probably wasn't Kanemasa but, we don't really have any proof of that. Just the fact that the culprit got away means that of course Motoko can't help worrying about it."

"This is the first I'd heard of it! My, how terrible."

Yeah, well, Kanami said, hazily.

"That isn't good for Kanemasa," Sachiko said. "If there are rumors like that, it won't do for them not to come out more."

"The people at Kanemasa probably haven't even thought in their dreams that there'd be a rumor like that."

"Even so! Didn't they move in and then burrow up in there without a word of greeting? Well, I just don't know what to think of

that. Someone ought to have a word with them, to tell them that that's no good!"

Tsuruko laughed. "Who would possibly tell them something like that? Nobody even knows them, much less is their friend, and they're supposed to visit their house and say that to them?"

"Oh, just call it a courtesy call. Say that it's the neighbor's association contacting them, just make up something. If you say you were just dropping by to say hello, why, who could get mad at that."

Tsuruko looked as if her curiosity had been sparked. "That might just work, that might."

I don't think we need to go that far, Kanami thought, but choose not to interrupt. She understood Sachiko and Tsuruko's curiosity. To start with they rebuilt a strange house, they were the ones to stir the flames of curiosity around themselves, so what choice did they have but to put up with some meddling from the people like this.

"They have a daughter too don't they? Perhaps we could get someone from the Naka-Sotoba PTA to talk to them. She will be going to the village's primary school or middle school, won't she?"

"Oh, but I heard she's frail and may not go to school."

Heeh, Kanami said, looking to Tsuruko. "Is that so?"

"Yup. They said that a young man who was like a servant of the house showed up at the Murasako rice shop. That's what that person said, it sounds like. A while ago when I was shopping, Chizuko-san told me so. She has some kind of illness, and they have a doctor in the house who looks over her. It's incurable, it sounds like. The mother and daughter, both of them have it."

"Oh my... That's just terrible. That's why they moved out here to the countryside."

"That's what it looks like."

Seemingly caught up in her thoughts for a moment, Sachiko

clapped her hands. "All the more reason, we could say we'd heard about that, and make an offer. The PTA will offer to help out in getting their daughter to go to school just as much as she is able."

"Ah, that's right," Tsuruko nodded. "That really might be better to ask them about. If she is going to school, she may need some assistance after all."

"Mightn't she? Maybe I should ask Koike-san from Naka-Sotoba to try talking to them!"

Nodding while looking at Tsuruko, in her mind Kanami sighed. It might have been an inflammatory thought but, she was developing some sympathies for the move-ins. It was clear that things were going to be made difficult for them for a while.

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4

Shimizu Megumi hurried down the small pathway as the crickets chirped.

It was a narrow path that followed the western mountain ridges from Shimo-Sotoba passing through Sotoba towards Monzen. There were fewer people she knew that way, so while she thought nobody would talk to her, in the end she did end up meeting someone, and she ended up caught by them again. She'd pass on having to talk to some old person with too much free time. She basically knew what they were going to say. Seems sometime they moved in, they'd say, or if not that, they'd make her listen about how someone died in Yamairi, and they'd finish it off by butting into her affairs like their talk was a cautionary tale.

(Who even cares?)

All humans died. And there were tons of old people in the village. People dying was something happening all the time every day. ---It was just something that usually happened somewhere they weren't seeing, that's all.

The adults were saying the community of Yamairi was gone now, making a big fuss over that but the likes of Yamairi were already gone a long time ago. Even now everyone seemed to have forgotten it again. It wasn't anything to make a fuss over now, she thought.

Even Megumi had the feeling something huge had happened when the dead people were found in Yamairi. It was in the papers and on TV, she had the feeling an extravagant change was going to take place but, nothing like that happened after all, and once she thought about it, even if it was in the papers or on TV, it was the

local edition, the local news, so from the start it really wasn't that big of a thing at all.

(In the end, weren't we just happy something unusual happened!)

Even while their eyes glistened with rumors of something greater, they paid lip service to it as sad, as if they had compassion or something. Even though nobody at all really thought it was sad at all. Yet if Megumi just honestly said she wasn't interested, they made a face as if looking down on her.

(Stupid town!)

It was so totally stupid. If something didn't have anything to do with you, that's what you'd call unrelated to you. Those unrelated people made a face as if the dead were once long time friends of theirs or something. She wanted to tell off the people making too much of a fuss over it. That they didn't have anything to do with them.

(And it's got nothing to do with me!)

It had nothing to do with Megumi. As for what did have something to do with her, on the other hand----

Megumi rounded the corner and looked up at the slope. Yesterday in the middle of the night, someone saw a truck go in, so went a rumor already rushing through the village. All the same, nobody had set sights on the owners. At least, Megumi had only heard rumors that someone had been seen, she didn't know of anyone who'd actually met with anyone yet. Giving the expected greetings to the neighborhood, coming down to see the state of the village for the time being, it seemed they hadn't done either. There was the possibility that they were simply busy finishing up with moving but, it may have been all to certain that the master didn't have much of a mind to proactively mingle with the village. Thus, Megumi had yet to hear any details of the inhabitants.

In the village full of nothing but stupid things, only that house held any meaning to Megumi. At the end of the day, she was nothing but another one of the masses to that house, Megumi knew

as much and yet until that was firmly determined and left her dejected, she couldn't help but hold expectations.

She didn't want to feel dejected. She didn't even want to imagine that the people who moved in wouldn't be interesting to her, that they themselves would hold no interest in her, that she would be shut out.

(That shouldn't happen....)

Looking up at the hill as if it would bite into her, Megumi coached herself. If you love this house this much, then you should definitely come to like the people in that house just the same. The owners definitely won't think the worst of someone like you, Megumi!

(Isn't that right?)

Caught up in her thoughts as she gazed upwards, when a voice suddenly called out to her, Megumi jumped.

"Megumi-chan!"

When she turned around, Kaori was coming, bringing her dog. As Megumi cast her eyes on her, Kaori waved her hand hugely. The dog Kaori brought was a stupid-faced looking mutt. It had a joke of a name like Love or something.

(If that house keeps a dog, I'm sure it's a foreign breed! An intrepid-like one.)

Megumi gave a longing look to the house.

"Today's hot again, isn't it? --Taking a walk?" Kaori said, following Megumi's gaze up the hill. "What's wrong, did you have some kind of business with that house?"

"There's no way I could, right?"

Embarrassed by something somehow, Megumi quickly turned from the hill. Kaori hurried to follow along, earning a sidelong glance from Megumi.

(What a dopy braid. At least use more than a rubber band, you could do a ribbon or something! And she just threw on a T-shirt!)

Kaori was one year younger than Megumi, and her house was nearby. Their mothers were friends too. Until last year they went to the same middle school. This year, Megumi started high school, and though Kaori was left with her last year of middle school, she came every morning to invite her to go to school together. Even though it wasn't like Megumi ever said anything like let's go together, she loyally came every morning like it was only natural. As Megumi took her time slowly getting ready, even while saying "I'm going to leave you behind!" and the like, she waited. At times like that, Kaori's face looked a lot like a dog's.

It was already set in stone that she would go to school together with Megumi. Going to the high school, even by bus, took thirty minutes, so for Kaori who went to the middle school in the village, there shouldn't have been any need to hurry out of the house so early. That she could just say to that: "It's fine, don't worry about it! It's perfect for me because I can prepare for class!" or something and expect her to be grateful was, in a word, stunning.

"Did you hear the rumors, that they'd moved in?" Kaori said, Megumi nodding. Kaori turned to look up the slope as she walked. From where the two were walking, they could no longer see the gate. What they could see were only the second story and the roof. Still, Megumi had the small sense that something about it had been ruined.

"They say they have a daughter, huh?"

As Kaori spoke, Megumi came to a stop. "A daughter? They have one?"

Uh huh, Kaori nodded. "That's what I heard. But, she's younger than us. She's in sixth grade or in middle school--somewhere around there."

Megumi's feelings were complicated. While she was happy that they had a daughter but, if she was younger then she had the feeling that she was out of luck. And that Kaori knew about it when

she didn't wasn't even funny.

".....Oh."

"A husband, a wife and a daughter. A three person family. The old ladies in the neighborhood were talking about it."

"Hnnn.... And?"

"And?"

"So, what kind of people are they?"

I don't know, Kaori shook her head. "I mean, I only overheard what they were standing around talking about. I'm not really that interested, I was just passing by."

"Not interested?" Megumi asked in shock, shocking Kaori herself.

"Megumi-chan, you're interested?"

"That's... Of course I am!"

"Even though they're so weird."

"Weird? Why would you say that!"

Kaori tilted her head at Megumi's cross-examination. Megumi, one year older, had been her friend since kindergarten but, at times she could be cold. Like now.

"Because... Didn't they move in in the middle of the night? Normally you wouldn't move in at that time of night."

"They could have a perfectly good reason for that."

I guess they could, Kaori murmured. "...But their house is weird."

"And I'm asking why you'd say that."

"It doesn't fit, does it, that house, this place."

"That's Sotoba's fault for being so country, isn't it."

But building a house like that out in this county is in itself was weird, Kaori had thought that, but it seemed Megumi didn't see it that way.

"It's kind of oppressive and dark and all..." Kaori said, earning a severely sharp glare for Megumi, her stare turning towards her scornfully. "....If I lived in that house, I'd get depressed."

"It's not like it's your house, so who cares!" Megumi's voice spoke as if thrusting at her as she turned about storming back.

"What's wrong? Did you have another fight with your mom?"

Megumi only gave a single look back at Kaori, without an answer. She promptly returned to the hill, and with only that fleeting look back to Kaori she ascended the slope. Kaori watched her, flabbergasted. They really had known each other a long time, but sometimes she just couldn't make sense of her.

Kaori spoke with a sigh to Love who had stopped at her feet with her. "I wonder if something happened to Megumi?"

The dog let out a disinterested yawn.

Megumi furiously stormed the hill. That country hick, she thought, the world swirling in her chest.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Uncouth inhabitants in an uncouth village. They didn't feel any embarrassment about themselves. No, not just that, they thought they were fine as they were!

That house was too good for this village. And yet the people weren't embarrassed before it, they blamed the house for being weird! Just like how they laughed at Megumi for changing her clothes even when just going out to the shops around town.

(It's not that house that's weird, it's you all that are weird!)

Taking her dog out on a walk in just whatever house clothes she threw on. If she didn't care about her appearances, it was because the village was an extension of her house. The whole village was thought of like one's yard, like extended family. People went into other's houses as if it were natural, telling other people how to live their lives as if they were family.

"I haaate this village!"

But Megumi was a prisoner of this village. Even though she wanted out she couldn't leave. Just like this she'd find a job in the village, marry somebody from the village, and become a part of it. --That was the one thing she'd pass on.

She wanted to go to college, wanted to work in the city. But her family and the neighbors around preached unanimously that girls were best off at home.

(It's the worst!)

Hunched in anger as she climbed the slope, Megumi raised her face up. Looking up at the house, she let it all out with a breath.

(The gate is...)

The hill pathway curved in front of the house, the gate positioned facing the front as if to cut off the road. A white wall with brick gate piers, the black metal fixtures over the amber boards of the gate, standing in the way of the road, that blocked off one's view, was slightly ajar.

The gap was only about five centimeters. Through that narrow opening, the grounds, flooded with light of the setting sun, could be seen. There was the stone paving that continued past the gate and the tips of tree branches that remained of the garden trees, and beyond that a dark stone wall.

Megumi had bit by bit climbed the hill. Her heart beat just a little faster. While peering through the doors of the gate, she quietly eased closer. The gap open to the outside world was tantalizingly narrow. The door on the first story window on the stone wall was

opened, and white curtains could be seen, but just barely. Within the house there were lights on. From the inner walls to the furniture, whatever it was, it could be seen by looking into the house, that much was clear.

Without realizing it, Megumi's breath caught. As she had approached the front of the gate, the gate doors moved as if swaying, perhaps blown by the evening breeze. One of the doors moved inward, swaying open. Picking up momentum, the gate slid open without a single sound, along the arced rail on the stone placement.

Megumi held her breath, and as if being lured in by it opening, neared that gate.

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Links to Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Translation Notes

Reader Question: Obaa-chan/Ojii-chan and variants of that get used an awful lot in this story. I'd been trying to translate them as Granny/Grandpa/Old Woman/Old Man and the like but there are times I'm not sure if my translation choice quite fits all the variations. Sometimes making it fit the character speaking is a stretch, too; Ozaki sometimes refers to people as just obaa-chan or something which works in Japanese but having him call them Granny seems off. Old man/old lady seems more his style, but I hesitate to translate the more polite Ritsuko calling them that even if she uses obaa-chan. I take issue with forcing my impression of the character voice over the text under any circumstances, including times like this when I think it's more a cultural nuance. English speakers don't tend to call people Granny/Grampy unless they're family or like family--while Sotoba is like one big family at times, Obaa-san/Ojii-san are standard in Japanese. I tried [slipping an Obaa-san](#) into one of the chapters here to see how it suits readers, but haven't gone back to revert all formerly translated bits into Japanese, and I can easily revert that one based on the final decision. **Do readers have a preference between that being translated out or kept in Japanese?**

Suzuki no obaa-chan; it's either going to be "The Suzuki Obaa-chan" or "The Suzuki's Obaa-chan" if kept in Japanese or, in English, "the Suzuki Granny" or "the Suzuki's Granny" and Suzuki Obaa-chan will either be Granny Suzuki in English or just left as Suzuki Obaa-chan.

I will eventually put them all to one or the other, unless of course it's a familial reference. If someone is referring to their own or someone else's grandfather, then regardless of which direction I go with names, I will be keeping those with the English term, such as when the monks are talking about the family of four that died in

Mizobe--The man, the wife, the son, the grandpa, etc. If someone talks about becoming an obaa-san or an ojii-san, then I'll still just keep it as talk about becoming an old man, etc. **This is only a question of what to do with it as an extension of or as a replacement for a name.**

Chapter 5-1

A two-stone handicap allowance - Ichimoku no nimoku mo oku - In the board game of go there are handicaps that can be given to weaker players in the form of stones placed at the opening of the game before the more skilled opponent. In the story context, it means the temple had a lot of leverage over the people and had to be respected as such.

Chapter 5-3

Child of Shame - Hajikakikko - A child born late to parents (say, in their late 30s or 40s), which is shameful because it's proof they're having sex at that age.

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1

When the phone rang at Kaori's house, it was a little after dinner, just past the beginning of a nine o'clock TV program.

Her mother who had picked up the phone spoke with the person on the other end, then called to Kaori who had been watching TV in the living room with a stern voice.

"Kaori, did you see Megumi-chan today?"

Kaori nodded. "When I was talking Love, I saw her."

"She says Megumi-chan hasn't come home yet. Did you hear anything."

Kaori blinked. "Not really..."

"So much for that. I wonder if she could have went to Mizobe?"

Megumi was dressed up, but that was normal for her, so she didn't know if she planned to go out or not. No, she didn't seem like she was leaving the village. After she talked to Kaori, she went up the hill after all...

Kaori took in the atmosphere. "We were in Monzen when we met, but..."

And then she went up the hill. Kaori hesitated to add that. Kaori was the only one to know that that hill was Megumi's secret. If you went down the slope partway up the hill into the village, you would come out to a house in Naka-Sotoba whose back yard was a mountain range. Since the year had started, Megumi had incessantly visited one certain house in Naka-Sotoba. In order to

quietly watch over a single window from the back yard.

Kaori swallowed her words. There was no way she could tell that to her mother. ---To anyone.

'I see', was all her mother said, turning back towards the receiver. Her little brother who was watching TV turned towards Kaori.

"What? Now Megumi's missing?"

Her little brother Akira was just a first year middle schooler and yet he spoke of not just Kaori but Megumi without any honorific.

"Don't say stupid things. I'm sure she's just late."

"Even at this hour?"

At Akira's words, she turned her eyes to the living room clock. 9:17.

Even if she was going to look in on Natsuno Yuuki's house as always, it was late. When she had met Megumi it was just past five, and she couldn't imagine her spending four hours from then, without even having dinner, in the bushes being bit up by mosquitoes looking up into that window.

"Don'tcha think something happened?"

The implications in Akira's tone made her raise her head, with rising uneasiness. The tragedy in Yamairi where the dead bodies were found was just a few days ago. While she had heard that it was nothing more than the elderly in bad condition who died---

Kaori's voice called out.

"Mom, ... Megumi-chan was climbing the hill that goes up under Kanemasa."

Her mother fleetingly turned her gaze to her, nodded, and conveyed as much over the phone.

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2

The phone rang, and Ohkawa interrupted his conversation with the bunch drinking sake at the counter to pick it up. The caller was the fire brigade's chief, Yasumori Tokujirou.

"Ah---Ohkawa-san. Do you know Shimizu-san from Shimo-Sotoba's daughter?"

Yeah, Ohkawa nodded. There wasn't any special connection between himself and Shimizu but the daughter was about the same age as Ohkawa's second son, so he wasn't completely unfamiliar.

"Well, it seems the girl hasn't returned home yet, you see."

"Heh?" Ohkawa raised a brow and looked up at the shop clock. It was going on nine thirty. It was well past the hours on their sign board but the heavy drinkers had stayed at the shop, and he'd still failed to close up shop. "That's strange. Even this late."

"Mm. It is. It seems she went up into the western mountains. With everything going on recently, with all the dangerous, her parents are worried. I thought I might search the mountains, but."

Ohkawa grimaced. Ohkawa was a member of the fire brigade, but he was the squad leader for the community of Sotoba. Having to go flush out a girl from Kami-Sotoba wasn't something he was exactly thankful for the chance to do. And thanks to the heavy drinkers he'd yet to eat anything that evening, making it all the less appealing.

"Anyway, I wonder if she didn't just go to hang out. Like, she's on a date and lost track of time. I mean, I'm not saying I don't wanna do it or anything but, that kid can be a careless one like that

sometimes, I just think."

"Boss Matsuo said that too," said Tokujirou with an audibly bitter smile. Matsuo Seiji was the quad leader for Shimo-Sotoba. "Well, think of how her parents feel and do it as a favor to me. Incidentally, could I have you bring by three cases of beer to the station, I wonder. It'll be my treat."

Ohkawa grinned. That was a very Tokujirou-like way to mind him.

"Understood. --Then, at the station."

As he hanged up the phone, the customers at the counter looked upon Ohkawa with great interested. "Did someone go missing? Who?"

Bracing herself as she asked was Itou Ikumi. She could be called a regular but, she only drank on other customer's generosity and never paid in her own cash.

"The Shimizu-san's house's daughter. Girl called Megumi."

Oh my, cried Ikumi in what could have been heard as a cheer. Ohkawa snorted through his nose, turning towards the second floor and calling up. "Oi, Atsushi! C'mere a sec!"

Taking enough time to be frustrating, his son leisurely came down.

"Don't drag your ass. We're doin' a mountain hunt."

"I've got to go too?"

Don't fuss and whine, Ohkawa shouted. Compared to his second son and his daughter, he was an embarrassment of a son but there was no denying he was his oldest boy. Some day he'd inherit the shop, and he'd probably inherit his job at the fire brigade too. Thinking as much, Ohkawa was sure to have his son accompany him when workers were needed.

What's wrong, said his daughter Yuzue poking her face out from

the living room. When he said that Megumi was gone, she made a complicated expression. His second son Yutaka popped his face out, looking worried.

"Should I go too?"

There's no need, Ohkawa had started to say when he thought twice. If they were going to be combing the mountains, then the more people the better, probably. "That's right. Get ready. Put on long sleeves and gloves. We'll be going into the mountains after all."

Mm, said Yutaka hurrying up to the second floor. Ohkawa shouted at Atsushi who stood there sulkily.

"You're coming too, so hurry and get ready! And three cases of beer. We're delivering 'em to the station!"

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3

Hasegawa flipped the switch, the electric lamp light fading out. Closing time already, said Yuuki as he dug in his pocket for his wallet. He must have seen him doing that, as Hirosawa assured him: "At your leisure," as he changed the CR to Rhythm and Blues, poured a glass of whisky and water and taking a seat at the counter. "Now the night begins. For me, at least."

Seeing Hasegawa with his glass in hand, his wife Chiyomi laughed.

"I'm going back early. Hirosawa-san, please don't let him get ahead of himself, all right?" Chiyomi said to Hirosawa, giving a smile to Yuuki and the others as she took off her apron. She hanged it back up in the small closet by the kitchen, waving her hand and leaving the shop. Hasegawa's home was on the other side of the shore in Mizuguchi.

Left in the shop were Hirosawa and Yuuki, and Tashiro Bookstore's Tashiro Masaki. Since coming here to

creole

after Gotouda Shuuji's service, he'd found himself walking in often, and through that came to know quite a few faces. The regular customers that made

creole

their stronghold had between them their own community tone. Yuuki found that to be indubitably cozy.

How much time had lapsed since Hasegawa had settled at the

counter, when Chiyomi returned?

"What's wrong? Forget something?"

At Hasegawa's voice, Chiyomi shook her head. "Is there anyone who might have seen Shimizu-san's daughter Megumi-chan?"

Hasegawa said no, looking at Yuuki and the others. Tashiro and Hirosawa shook their heads. Yuuki didn't know who Shimizu Megumi was to start with. Yuuki looked at Chiyomi.

"Shimizu---do you mean, the Shimizu-san who comes here? From JA."

"Yes. Megumi-chan is Shimizu-san's daughter. She's in tenth grade. ---Ah, I wonder if she might be a classmate of Yuuki-san's household's son?"

She is, Hirosawa nodded. "They go to the same high school. That would make them classmates, wouldn't it? ---And, what has happened to that Megumi-chan? You don't mean...?"

Chiyomi nodded. "They say she hasn't come home. Shimizu-san and his wife are at the police box, people are gathering."

"Searching the mountains?" Tashiro asked gravely.

"It looks like it. After all, look at the hour. There was a person who'd last seen her going up the western mountain, so they're saying she may have been stranded up there."

Yuuki looked towards Hirosawa and the others. "Is it that dangerous, being up in the mountains around here?"

"No--it is not the mountains themselves which are dangerous. However it would be difficult if you lost your way in the mountains north of Yamairi.

Or perhaps in the back yard of the Shrine. It would be dangerous to fall into the Hell Hole, but..."

"Hell Hole?"

Hirosawa pointed to the east. "Across the river, there is the Shrine, correct? If one were to scale the cliff behind it, there's a cave called the Hell Hole."

"Heh..."

"I'm not certain whether to call it a cliff or a crag but, in a gap there is a narrow fissure. I wonder how deep it goes? There's a hokora erected at the entrance, so I don't know if one could enter it but it has many branch roads, and it seems to be quite long. It looks like it goes down to the base of the earth itself, which is likely why it was named the Hell Hole."

"She couldn't get in there, yes?"

"Yes. But, there's what's above that hole. The Hell Hole crosses from behind the shrine diagonally along the eastern mountain but, in more shallow places there are times when it caves in and the hole opens. That area is the shrine forest, so nobody entered the area to cut trees. From the start, people never went in there, so if the hole opened, it wouldn't be known."

"But that's unrelated. The last she was seen, she was climbing the western mountains--the Kanemasa hill, they said."

"Then, it shouldn't be that she got lost, at least. A forest path runs along the western mountain ranges, and as long as you don't go off the path you won't go over the ridges, you'd still be in the village." Tashiro said, as Hasegawa tilted his head.

"Couldn't she have mistakenly gone off of the forest path and ended up crossing over the ridge?"

Hirosawa shook his head. "The forest path follows the steel towers and the high voltage wires. Even if she had lost her sense of direction, she would know quickly if she had stepped off the mountain path. She is a villager, so I don't think that she would make such a mistake. She may be injured or stranded someplace. Lately, there has been talk of wild dogs coming out too, yes?"

"Takami-san and the others had said that. So they're calling

together members of the fire brigade, they say."

"Well, Shimizu-san must feel like his heart's in his mouth," said Hasegawa rising to a stand. "This is no time for drinking. Let's head out and help."

"I too will be going," said Hirosawa as Yuuki and Tashiro rose. He was familiar with Shimizu. And moreover, hearing that it was his son's classmate, he couldn't take it as somebody else's problem.

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4

When Toshio came back from a house call, he saw a familiar car stopped on the lot. Putting his examination bag down in the waiting room, he returned to his house to see, as expected, his wife Kyouko had returned home.

"What, you're back?"

At Toshio's voice, Kyouko who was sitting in the western style living room waved her hand flippantly.

"From tomorrow on is Obon, isn't it? I was told to come back."

Toshio blinked. "....By my mother?"

"By who else? Come back on the thirteenth, we've made plans, so don't think you can just come on the day of, she shrieked at me. --- By the way, what plans did you have for Obon?"

"You ask like you expect me to know? It's probably that you haven't been by lately, so she just wanted to see your face."

"Well isn't that just an honor," Kyouko sighed. "But, I'm not happy with this at all."

Me neither, Toshio answered in his thoughts.

"And somehow, I get the feeling her good humor was worse than usual."

"It's bad. Ever since Kanemasa moved in."

Oh really, Kyouko leaned her body forward. "They finally came

in?"

"Aa. Just the day before yesterday. My mother was probably wanting them just stay away without moving in. Since then, she's been fault finding all over the place."

Oh no, said Kyouko throwing herself onto the couch and arching her white neck. She grumbled with a sigh to the ceiling. "I'm starting to want to go back to Mizobe."

"So go back."

"If I do that, she'll attack me on the phone."

Probably, Toshio mumbled. That Takae did not find Kyouko agreeable was something he knew, from hearing her say as much more than often enough. So, while it should have been fine to leave her as she was out in Mizobe, it seemed she didn't find that agreeable either. When Toshio had said, half in jest, that she could go back to her own family, why, how it would dishonor our family! Takae said, her face warping. She would certainly never allow something as indecent as a to be like a divorce, so she had said. So in the end, nothing was agreeable to her.

As the married couple let out a sigh, Takae herself entered the western style living room. She seemed fresh from the bath, in her nightwear.

"Oh, welcome back."

Yeah, Toshio said, averting his gaze. She prodded Kyouko, whose legs were exposed in her slovenly casual mini-skirt, in the elbow. Kyouko gave an aggravated sigh and corrected her seating posture.

"I have taken my bath first."

Sure, Toshio gave as a half-hearted response. With a composed expression, Takae took up post on one section of the couch. Just as he was thinking of escaping, the doorbell rang and he was saved.

"Now who might that be, at this hour?" Suppressing Takae whose brows had furrowed as she spoke, Toshio stood up.

"It's fine, I'll get it. It might be an emergency for me." So he said, swiftly making a brisk escape to the entryway.

In the entryway stood resident officer Takami with a grave expression. As soon as he saw Toshio's face he asked whether he'd seen Shimizu Megumi. Toshio tilted his head. Megumi was a girl who could be said to cause quite a fuss for him as a doctor but, maybe because it was summer vacation, she hadn't shown her face here for a while.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me something happened to Megumi-chan?"

"We haven't seen her. She set out at noon, and it seems she hasn't returned yet."

Toshio cast his eyes down to his wristwatch. Half past ten.

"....This late? No contact?"

"It seems not. In the evening she was seen climbing the slope to Kanemasa by somebody, but that's it."

"That's worrisome, isn't it."

Maybe this happened all the time in the city but in the village there weren't any girls out for a stroll at this hour. Even if she were hanging out in the neighborhood, she wouldn't have missed dinner and also given no phone call or contact.

"I hope nothing's happened. Was the fire brigade contacted?"

"I did. Lately wild dogs have been about, and with as many strange things as have been happening, Shimizu-san is becoming very pale. They're talking about searching the mountains for her a little bit."

"I'll go too," Toshio said, a voice from behind sounding out as he stepped out of the entryway.

"You must be joking!"

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Takae, who had put on a summer haori, giving Takami a stern eye.

"There is no reason for you to do such a thing. --And you, Takami-san, what were you thinking?"

Takami stiffened his spine like a child be chastised for a prank.

"Toshio is the medical director of the Ozaki Clinic. He simply cannot vacate the premises so freely. In the first place, we never know when an emergency may arise. Everyone's lives are entrusted to him."

"Yes....., thank you." Takami bowed deeply.

"Setting aside that you have come to Toshio for direction, what is this talk of having him assist with searching the mountains! It is very troubling if you make use of the Ozakis at your convenience!"

"No, ma'am, that was not my intention. I was only asking a question. Then, please excuse me for the night." Takami bowed his neck, hurriedly lowering his head. He raised his face, seeing Toshio's bitter smile. With his body turned so that Takae wouldn't see from behind him, he raised his hand in an apologetic gesture. Takami understood, showing Toshio a faint smile.

"My, how rude of me. ---Then, if you'll excuse me."

Lowering his head to Takae once more, Takami quickly left the Ozaki household.

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5

As foretold by the Oracle, he was driven from the hill, wandering the wasteland.

The Shiki at his side was, at least as far as he was concerned, nothing more than an extension of that curse. His little brother's corpse was the most forthright symbol of his sin. He was to, with him at his side, wander over the barren, frozen soil.

In the dense night ruled over by the evil spirits, he merely kept his head down, walking on resolutely while accompanied by the wil;-o'-the-wisps. Aware of his little brother who had become a Shiki at his side, cowed into silence he traversed the frozen earth beneath his feet.

At last, as the vigorous jeers of the evil spirits surrounding at a distance died out, the great earth was tinged in white light. The fine grains of the cold ground glittered in the light of dawn, its textures exposed, and, suspecting the presence beside him that had at last begun to dim had faded, he raised his face.

He was alone in the great rift between heaven and earth.

There was neither a trace of the evil spirits that trailed him, nor of his little brother.

As far as he could see upon of the cold ground and the dull skies, the undulations of obstinate deep red stretched on to the horizon, above which hung low clouds like sheep that had seeped in muddy waters. The dawn dyed red the melancholy clouds and those highs and lows in a catastrophic cross-hatch.

There were the dips and valleys of the inorganic earth, the life like, coordinated writhing of the clouds, and interposed betwixt the two left in the gap was none other than him and he alone. If he turned to look behind him, in the distance he could see the green hill passed over by the night. Pushed aside by the winds, the swirl of

the clouds was cut off in the skies above that hill, a small, round beam of light pouring straight down upon it.

It was due to that light that, far away as he was, the greenery of that hill and the circular wall enclosing its base, as well as the white town erected on its summit were clear to view. It floated within the somber world, literally shimmering. A green so greed as to be radiant, stones so pure white they stung the eyes, with a splendor as if in direct contact with that sky above.

That was the hometown he was driven out of, unable to make restitution, the land where his brother who had become a Shiki slept, which lead to him being driven out into the wilderness, only able to stand, as if he existed only to cast shadows upon the earth, longing for it.

The clouds, the earth, the light, the hill. They awoke a memory within him of when he received the temple's verdict.

Why, the elder asked.

The hall contained in grey stone, closely, closely

"Junior Monk."

Called out to, Seishin turned to look. Looking fresh from the bath with a towel over his head, Ikebe peered into the temple office window.

"Pardon me. Do you have a moment?"

Ikebe said apologetically. Seishin set his pencil down. "What is it?"

"Junior Monk, I suppose you haven't seen Megumi-chan from the Shimizu-san's place, have you?"

"No." Seishin tilted his head. The Shimizus were a parish family but he had mostly never met with their daughter Megumi, and he couldn't remember when he'd last seen her face or when that was. "I haven't seen her in a long while. ---What's happened?"

"Well, it seems she hasn't come home yet. Resident officer Takami-san is here, but."

Seishin stood and stepped out of the office. As he rounded the

corner in the hallway, Takami stood in the dirt floor entryway with a flashlight in one hand, Miwako kneeling upon the rising step into the home with a look of concern on her face.

"Good evening. What's happened to Megumi-chan?"

"Ah---Excuse the intrusion, Junior Monk. I hope you weren't in the middle of work?"

"Don't mind it. Megumi-chan hasn't come home?"

That's right, said Takami who explained the situation. While doing so he wiped the sweat dampening the back of his neck. He must have been bitten by mosquitoes, the sun burnt nape of his neck peppered in red.

"I mean lately, you know, a lot of things have happened. So everyone would be worried, right?"

"What happened in Yamairi?" Seishin started to say, but Takami waved his hand.

"What, no, not the talks about a degenerate or anything like that. Though there may be people who are thinking along those lines. But, while those rumors are also making people uneasy, there are the ones about the wild dogs. Lately, there's a lot of talk of people seeing wild dogs in the mountains lately."

Aa, Seishin murmured. "That is so, certainly."

"I figured, the Junior Monk has not seen Megumi-chan, then?"

Yes, Seishin nodded.

Miwako's brows knitted together as she touched her hand to her cheek.

"I wonder if it might not be best to go and help?"

"That's right. ---I'll head out for a bit."

As Seishin turned back, Takami hastily called out. "No, that's! I

didn't come to have the Junior Monk join in. It's just that she might be stranded someplace, so I had just come to see if there was any sign of her."

Takami was unexpectedly flustered.

"But,"

"No, really. If I have the Junior Monk help, I'll be scolded by the elderly," Takami said with a forced smile. "To tell the truth, just a while ago, the Madame of the Ozaki's just finished scolding me. For carelessly going to consult with the doctor."

I see, Seishin smiled bitterly.

"So, please do not mind and leave it be."

"Then, I'll go," Ikebe said.

"No, Ikebe-kun, but..."

At Takami's attempt to keep him from joining, he smiled. "A parishioner is in peril! Isn't it better if there are more people helping?"

"That's right," Miwako smiled. "Ikebe-kun, might you do this for us? You'd just finished with your bath, too, I really am sorry."

"Not at all. She's a young lady after all, Shimizu-san must not have a heart to go on. Either way I was just going to go on to sleep anyway. Junior Monk, please keep on working."

"I'm sorry."

Don't be, Ikebe said cheerfully. "Just let me change my clothes right quick, Takami-san, please wait just a moment."

"Man, I'm really sorry," Takami scratched his head as he saw Ikebe hurry into the depths of the temple living quarters. "It'd be good if she just went to a friend's house and lost track of time."

"It would," Miwako said with a sigh. "But, it has become this late. Shimizu-san must indeed be so worried."

"That's right. No call, and even with it this late, she hasn't come back."

Miwako slightly inclined her head. "Have you tried Kanemasa?"

Ha? Takami blinked. Unable to follow his mother's line of thinking, Seishin also looked to her face.

"Oh dear, I wonder if I've said something so off?" Miwako, bewildered, pinched her mouth tightly. "I had heard that a family had moved into Kanemasa. Perhaps by chance, they had a child of the same age. Megumi-chan had gone up the hill, hadn't she? I wonder if she hadn't met with somebody from Kanemasa and became caught up in a conversation in which she lost track of time, perhaps?"

"Aa---that could be."

"But, Mother. If that were the case, Megumi-chan would have had the opportunity to call, wouldn't she? Kanemasa's family likely would have pressed her to call as well."

"My, but the idea of calling never even entered their minds precisely because they lost track of time, is what I am saying. In the village of course one would call but the rumors say that that family is from the city, so perhaps the idea that it would be best to call home or such does not cross their minds, don't you think?"

"But, even so...."

"That's true. Even so, not making contact over dinner, is certainly strange," Miwako said, smiling with a blush. "My apologies. I was just thinking that she had gone up the hill, and from there it had just came to mind. Please forget about it."

No, no, Takami said while smiling when suddenly he seemed struck by something.

"It might still be the case, even if unexpectedly. ----But." Takami

tilted his head. "I have heard rumors that it seemed they had moved in but, as for what kind of people they are..."

"My, aren't there people who have at least seen them?"

"About that," Takami said, his voice lowering. "There isn't anybody. It seems they don't come out of the house at all."

"Is that so?" Miwako said, her eyes wide in surprise.

"There's talk that that a young guy from there's been sighted, but nothing on the essential family themselves. To say the least, they don't seem to have any plans to interact with their neighbors. With them acting like that, anything that would lead to Megumi-chan meeting with them is hard to think up...."

Seishin nodded in his mind. The Kirishikis had moved in the day before yesterday. Meeting Tatsumi was something that happened yesterday. He hadn't heard any rumors about the master of the house but that the essential man of the family had yet to show himself before the village.

Because they had only been moved in for two days, they were probably still finishing cleaning up from the move. Maybe they just didn't feel up to walking around the village but, him not showing himself at all was somewhat of a surprising circumstance. Did they not have any interest in what type of village they had just moved into? Did he not want to take a walk about to survey the surroundings of his house like Tatsumi or----.

Seishin tilted his head, when Ikebe returned in jeans and a long sleeved shirt with a flashlight in hand.

"Sorry, thanks for waiting!"

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6

Specks of light dotted the western mountain. Voices mingled calling out 'Ooi!'

"Man, she's not along any of the roadways," said Tashiro as Yuuki wiped his sweat. The mountain nights were cool but as expected when climbing up and down the slope, it got hot.

There were limits to searching with a hand light within the village. Following the forest paths, pushing through the surroundings and coming back lead to many repeats but there was an uneasiness that they hadn't searched enough.

'Ooi,' came a voice from very nearby on the mountain, and for a moment, Yuuki anticipated good news but the voice that replied back was tinged with disappointment.

"This's, it's not gonna work out unless we give a full blown mountain hunt. Let's regroup around the Maruyasu lumberyard."

Hirosawa sighed and climbed back onto the forest path, Yuuki following suit. It was only one block of mountains surrounding a small village, and yet trying to find a single person amongst that made one realize, the mountains really were broad.

Fatigued as they were, while hobbling down the forest path, Tashiro and the young man walking with him came to a stop. It was a monk from the temple. He was called Ikebe, if he recalled. He was just approaching the Kanemasa house.

"What's the matter, Ikebe-kun?" Hirosawa asked, Ikebe turning to face him with a complicated expression.

"I wonder if anyone in this house has seen Megumi-chan. Wouldn't it be better to ask them?"

Hirosawa blinked. "At this hour?"

"Yeah," Ikebe smiled, embarrassed. "The Madame at the temple was talking about it to Takami-san. Maybe there's a chance she met the people from this house, and couldn't she have forgot the time, like."

"But,"

"And we can't just say 'at this hour' can we, since Megumi-chan was seen climbing the hill? In that case, they may have seen her."

That is true, said Hirosawa making a complicated expression himself as he looked up at the dark house. Yuuki understood Hirosawa's bewilderment. Since they'd moved in, the inhabitants hadn't shown themselves. It looked like those who lived there had no intend to proactively mingle with the villagers. With high fencing that couldn't be peered through, together with such a closed off house, it was thought that the new inhabitants wanted to draw a line between themselves and the villagers. Calling on such people at this hour to ask about a little girl's whereabouts, however proper, was cause for indecision.

"Shall we try?" The one to say this was Hasegawa. "You're absolutely right. They may have seen her, at least. If that's the case, they may know which direction she had gone, or something along those lines. If Megumi-chan is injured and stranded, what's important is finding her every bit sooner as possible."

That's true, Hirosawa nodded. Yuuki and the others approached the tightly closed gates. On the side of one gatepost pillar was a side door, and on the side of that an intercom was visible. ---Yes, even if they were intruding and waking somebody, all that they needed do was speak over the intercom, so doing this much, in case of an emergency, was bound to be forgivable.

As their representative, Hirosawa placed his finger on the button.

While looking over the faces about him, he timidly pressed the call chime. Twice, three times, and the fourth time there was an answer.

"Yes."

"Uhm---I'm sorry for disturbing you late at night. There's something we'd like to ask, but," Hirosawa conveyed briefly that a high school girl had gone missing and that they were wondering whether they had seen her.

"One moment please."

The voice on the other end of the intercom sounded young. A number of people in the village had said they'd caught sight of a young man in about his mid twenties, so it was said so, it must have been him, Hirosawa thought.

After a bit, the side door opened, Hirosawa faltered. The one who appeared with a flashlight in hand was the man of the rumors.

"Thank you for waiting."

"I am sorry again. At this hour."

"No, no. ---It's just, I'd asked every member of the house but, it seems nobody has seen the young lady."

Is that right, Hirosawa sighed.

"That she had climbed up this way is certain?"

"Yes. The last time she was seen, it was when she was climbing this hill, it seems."

Is that right, he said stepping outside and closing the door, smiling at the blinking Hirosawa. "I was told by the master to help. They must be worried, he said."

"No--that's," Hirosawa said, dismayed. "To have you do that much for us would be,"

"No. This is the sort of thing we must ban together for. Ah, I am called Tatsumi!"

"I am Hirosawa. I'm sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much."

Tatsumi smiled. "But I may only get in the way. I'm not very familiar with the lay of the land around here, so please instruct me in what to do."

The group split up to split their coverage of the mountains. Yuuki had merely been following Hirosawa and the others. At some point he ended up in a line with Tatsumi and Ikebe, because it was clear they were the only ones unfamiliar with the mountains.

"Ah, is that the way to the temple?" Tatsumi said to Ikebe, shining his light on the surroundings. "The other day, I had met the fellow named Muroi-san. He was just coming out of the Ozaki clinic."

"The Junior Monk? Heh?"

"You did not hear about it?"

"Yeah. The Junior Monk is the type of person who wouldn't gossip about things like that at all."

Tatsumi smiled. "He was indeed a mild man."

"That's right. If it was me, I'd spread it all over right away though. At the end of the day, I'm a Hachigoro at heart."

"Is there any News Value to spread with that?"

"Oh, definitely. Everyone in the village is extremely interested, you should know! I mean, your fine house is rather strange, and since moving all the way out here they haven't stepped out even once, have they? So with that, what kind of people are they, and the like, is everywhere."

"It isn't that we don't come out at all, but. I see, that's what it's come to, huh?"

"To put it bluntly, it's thought that you're avoiding the villagers. I

mean, I was completely surprised when Tatsumi-san stepped out like this!"

"Avoiding? Why is that?"

"Yeah, well, since moving in, you haven't come out at all. There's that tall fence, and the gate's always shut up real tight."

"Really?" Tatsumi blinked, as he mused. "Maybe in that case, it was not good to move in without giving greetings anywhere. We hadn't been into the habit of socializing with our neighbors much, so it really just never crossed anyone's minds."

"Oh. Well, then." At Ikebe's response, Yuuki laughed.

"That's how it goes when you live in the city. Unless there's a notice going around the neighborhood, you don't usually even know your neighbor's faces, and if you live in an apartment you don't even have that much. You leave the gates closed and even during the day time you lock your doors. Out here though, even in the middle of the night, everything is left open and unlocked. In the beginning even I was a little reluctant to get used to it, myself."

"Yuuki-san also moved in from the city?"

"That's right. That's why, even if I knew from the start that that's how it was, I was reluctant. Somehow, I just couldn't stay calm about it, so I would end up locking up the front entryway. Though to start with our house never even had a lock on the back door."

"Heh?"

"It was like---like I'd left the gas oven on somewhere, it felt like. It took about half a year for me to get used to it."

"So that's how it is, huh?" Tatsumi nodded. "I'll have to report that when I go back. I don't think anyone's thought about that at all."

"Though I don't think it's anything you have to force on yourselves. But, isn't it boring? Bored up in the house all the time like that."

Yuuki nodded, too. "You've finally moved all the way out here after all. You can leave the house without locking the doors, know everybody in the neighborhood, easily come and go helping each other out. ---That is the greatest thing of all about small societies like this."

"Isn't it just?" Tatsumi nodded with a smile, and Yuuki devoted himself to the search. It made him uneasy to get too caught up in small talk, and in doing so some distance had been put between themselves and Hirose and the others who had started on ahead. While hurrying his feet, he thought to himself that even with such a difficult move in, the family wasn't really all that strange.

---All it is is what it is, as was so often the case.

Maybe because they had closed their mouths and were hurrying ahead, they were able to overhear another nearby search group's conversation.

"Man, this is really eating up all kinds of time."

"It'll be great if we find her, but. I don't think I could deal with finding her already en route to Buddhahood."

Without thinking, Yuuki looked towards the forest. Through the spans of dark underbrush and thicket, the flashlights couldn't be seen. It seemed there were two or three but he couldn't tell which people precisely they were.

"Sure hope we don't. Anyway, ain't she probably just out fooling around somewhere? Come tomorrow, she'll just come back with a bland look on her face."

"She just might. It is the Shimizu girl, ain't it? That girl likes to show herself off. Makes you wonder if she's not getting it on shacked up with some guy."

"If she's just shacking it up that'd be for the best, though. I mean, they're saying just recently the old people up in Yamairi were killed off, weren't they? I just hope that freak's not still hanging around somewhere."

"Those were natural deaths, weren't they?"

"I've got to wonder about that. Just before that there was that thing--the little boy from the Maeda household, wasn't it? There was a hit and run on him, wasn't there? Things ain't as peaceful as they used to be, even in this village."

"I don't wanna say this too loud but, I personally think we might just get this over with faster if instead of searching the mountains we arrested Ohkawa's boy and asked him where she is."

"More like Kanemasa. After all there is a young guy with them, isn't there? Couldn't he have dragged her into the bushes out here?"

Yuuki came to an immediate halt, turning towards Tatsumi. Tatsumi pointed to himself with his index finger, a comically dumbfounded look on his face.

"Yeah, yeah! There's talk that the car that did a hit and run on the Maedas was the Kanemasa's car, you know!"

"Now hey, you, didn't the Junior Monk from the temple have a talk with them?"

"No matter what else is going on, I don't think that one's true."

"I gotta wonder. In the first place all the folks in the village are always treat the temple a little too special. Even with the Shimizu's daughter, we can't be too sure. I mean, that Junior's past thirty already and still single, you know."

"The temple has another one on the younger side, too. Couldn't it have been him?"

Yuuki was somehow too ashamed to keep walking. He waited for the voices to move far on ahead. Tatsumi and Ikebe stopped, as if waiting for Yuuki. The sounds of others pushing their way through the underbrush grew distant, until Yuuki let out a secret sigh of relief.

"....Please don't think we're all like that."

"It's nothing for Yuuki-san to make such a face about. An outsider is just that," Tatsumi said with a forced smile. "All the more for staying so strangely indoors. It really would have been for the best had we gone around giving greetings."

"Even if you went around introducing yourselves, you would still be seen around as outsiders...." Ikebe breathed a sigh. "To start with, the villagers are basically family, after all."

"That is how it goes." Speaking with an intentionally flippant tone to the two, he bowed his head. The tendency of the village to exclude foreign substances as a matter of course was something Yuuki was all too personally familiar with.

Ikebe laughed. "Once we find Megumi-chan, her parents will be put at ease, and we'll have proof to clear our names. --Let us go!"

The angry voices shouting out 'Oo!' went on into the night past three in the morning. Hearing 'I found her!' Yuuki and the others pushing their way through the thicket looked up. As they looked around for the source of the voice, Hirosawa and the others came hurrying back from a nearby slope.

"It was from that way!"

Yuuki and the others headed in the direction indicated. Yuuki himself had completely lost his sense of where he was but according to Hirosawa, Yuuki and the others were apparently fairly far north of the western mountains.

"Far ahead of here is a narrow mountain stream, and across that is the northern mountain. The one with the temple."

So they were right where the northern and western mountains crossed. Going down the slope, it seemed to come out to a cove like area where the Maruyasu lumberyard isolated the terraced fields.

The lights from within the village mingled, along with the voices of the people. From here and there and there and here the sounds of the underbrush giving way was heard, people coming to gather round. Hurrying along after Hirosawa and Tashiro at the front, at

last the place where the lights gathered together could be seen. There was a difference in level about one person's height tall, and beneath that in a hollowed out place the people gathered.

"Did you find her?"

As Hirosawa came running, a man wearing a fire brigade happi coat turned to face him. "She's here. ---Right here."

"Is she hurt?" Hirosawa asked, the man cocking his head.

"At least it doesn't look like she is."

Yuuki who had come running was also able to see the girl being helped up by so many people. She didn't look to be injured, but she was entirely limp.

"Hey, you're Megumi-chan, ain'tcha? You okay?" A middle aged man who helped her up gave the girl a shake. Someone's voice called out: "It'd be better not to shake her too much!"

"Wouldn't it be best to call the Ozaki Doctor? She might've hit her head."

"Ah... That's true."

Just as the middle aged man spoke, Megumi's eyes opened. The lights gathered around were brilliantly bright, so she raised her hand to cover her eyes.

"You're conscious? Are you okay?"

To the surrounding questions, Megumi nodded. She seemed out of it somehow but she didn't look to have any injuries.

"How do you feel? Can you stand?"

When spoken to, she gave a somehow mindless, slow-witted not. Gripping the hands offered from right and left, somehow, she was able to stand.

"Thank God," came a relieved voice. With the men's support,

Megumi staggeringly started down the slope.

"If she can walk by herself, I guess there's nothing to worry about," Hasegawa said, Yuuki letting out a deep sigh. If noting else, it was good she was safe.

"She must've fallen off the ledge, huh? Just glad we found her, honestly." Tashiro gave a broad smile and Yuuki nodded. Boisterously relieved sighs and smiling voices flowed back into the village, people coming down from the mountains in groups of twos and threes.

When Ikebe returned to the temple, it was after four, and the light from the office next to the temple living quarters was still on. He quietly opened the entryway door, standing on the dirty floor as he tried to brush off the mud and scraps of grass clinging to his jeans when, perhaps having heard him, Seishin came.

"Welcome home. I am sorry for having put you through the trouble."

Spoken to by the assistant head priest, the younger Ikebe bowed his head. Ikebe couldn't hate that nature of Seishin's. While he was ever mindful of having reserved manners no matter how long he had known someone, which could make him thought of as constrained, it was much better than him treating people overbearingly.

"How did it go?" Seishin asked, worried. The assistant head priest stayed up late often enough but today he may have been up waiting on Ikebe.

"We found her."

"Ah, that's good. In the mountains after all?"

"Yes. Just at the ledge in the back yard of Maruyasu. It appears she fell on the slope or something along those lines; she was unconscious when we found her."

"Is she all right?"

"It seems so," Ikebe said, sitting on the ledge of the entryway. He spoke while taking off his leather boots. "When she was called, her eyes opened. She seemed kind of lifeless, but as far as injuries, it looks like she didn't have any, and with a little support she was able to walk down the mountain."

"Ah... that's good."

Thinking whether 'good' could be said or not made Ikebe remember Megumi's state. Megumi seemed absent minded. With a gaze seemingly unfixed, her gait while walking, even supported, was unnatural. The state of having had a terrifying experience, like heart hadn't sobered to the experience was what it looked like.

"I wonder if something happened?" While listening to Seishin's question asked with a voice from the bottom of his heart, Ikebe thought of complicated matters, getting the mud off of his shoes.

"That's something we can't be sure of, as Megumi-chan herself didn't say a thing. Even if you spoke to her, she seemed inattentive, or like she was spaced out. Once she's home, slept, and calmed down, they could try to ask again."

Ikebe stopped short in his answer.

The village was small. At some point, that conversation would become a rumor, one which would probably come back through the temple. Ikebe who came into Sotoba from the city, was unpleasantly familiar with the narrowness of the "society" of the village.

(Even though he's a good person....)

Ikebe thought. Towards the assistant head priest, Ikebe held unconditional good will. Yet, there were people saying strange things. Just like before when the child was hit, he couldn't help but wonder why.

Honestly, thought Ikebe, suddenly remembering a rumor he had overheard. He stole the faintest side glance at Seishin's profile.

It was a rumor he could certainly never ask Mitsuo or Tsurumi

about. Was it really true? Maybe the reason the villagers looked upon him so strangely was----could it be because of that?

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It was the day after Megumi had been found that Shimizu called Toshio---by the calendar date, it would be called that same night. Toshio picked up the receiver to Shimizu's trembling voice informing him that Megumi's condition seemed off, and that he wanted an examination.

"Off? What is her condition?"

"That's..." Shimizu hesitated. "It doesn't seem like anything hurts, from the way she's acting. I don't know how to put it, but it seems like she's in a daze. According to my wife, since she was found in the mountains this morning, she's been like this the whole day."

Toshio tilted his head. "If you put it like that, I can't really say. If you don't give me something more specific...."

"That's why I'm asking if you could please come and examine her."

"I don't want you to think I'm trying to get out of making a house call." As Toshio said that, Kyouko and Takae who were seated on the sofa watching TV turned to look at him. "Anyway, if I don't ask about her condition, I won't know how to prepare either. Even if I only do the bare minimal treatment myself, if we can't say what she needs, then I can't very well bring her to the hospital, either. ---She have a fever?"

"She doesn't seem to."

"How's her appetite?"

"It seems she hasn't laid a hand on anything since this morning."

"Does it seem to hurt anywhere?"

"No. It doesn't especially seem like something in particular hurts. But, even if we talk to her she doesn't respond, like she's not even

paying attention," said Shimizu, continuing with an audible gritting of his teeth. "I really think it'd be best if we brought her there for an overnight observation, but. That's---my wife is worried enough, after everything else. I'm sorry to ask, but could you please come and have a look at her?"

Toshio sighed. "I understand. Anyway, I'll make preparations and be on my way."

As he hung up the receiver, Takae shot him a sharp eyed glance, then ostentatiously looked up to the clock on the wall. Kyouko shrugged her shoulders and offered Toshio a sympathetic look, then looked away.

"A house call? At this hour!"

Toshio, too, looked to the clock. It was already past ten.

"Oh really, if they could at least think of the hour, don't you agree?"

Regardless of the hour, Shimizu was worried enough about his daughter to call him, Toshio thought, but he didn't bother to voice such a counter. In these cases, he'd already accepted that saying anything to his mother was useless. With no particular response, he left the living room, Takae following behind.

"It's because you're always so accessible to them. You're so easy to work in the ground. --Just who was it?"

"Shimizu-san's place," he answered heading into the hospital.

"Speaking of the Shimizu line, weren't they looking for their daughter? She was found?"

"Guess so," he said going through the hallway door. Toshio secretly referred to this hallway as the buffer zone. The door to the waiting room was an international boundary. Takae seldom set foot in the buffer zone, much less crossed into foreign lands. But, tonight Takae was in rare form, apparently in the mood to cross the border herself.

"Guess so, you say. What happened to Takami-san? He didn't come to report?"

"He didn't have to, did he?"

"Well of course he had to! Didn't he come all the way here yesterday to report that a girl was missing? And with a tone as if you should be expected to search with him. After coming by like that, doesn't it only follow that he owes a report on what happened from there? In the first place, you are a member of the neighborhood watch committee. If something happens, you do need to hear about it."

"It's not like I searched with them, and it's not like anything special happened."

"It is obvious that something did happen, a young girl went missing until such an hour. Or are you saying she said nothing to her parents and stayed out over night?"

"Mom." Toshio breathed a deep sigh and turned around. You could say Takae coming all the way to the waiting room was a rare sight. But, of course it wasn't one that pleased him in the slightest. "I heard that Megumi got hurt somehow or another in the mountains and couldn't move. After that, her condition still seems bad. Shimizu-san came to me asking for me to examine her. As a doctor, I have patients. I have to get out there quickly. Save any talk like this for after I've returned."

Takae was clearly let down. "It isn't as if this is a discussion simply for my curiosity, you realize. I am asking what you think of how easily you let yourself be worked by them."

"Mother."

"Is the daughter of the Shimizu household in such a condition that you need to go out at this hour? If you just easily let yourself be dragged out of here, what if a patient who really is having a dire emergency comes while you are out?"

"If it's a dire emergency, they'd call an ambulance before me."

Everyone's got the common sense for that."

"Toshio."

"Anyway, I'm off."

Toshio entered the waiting room. As expected, Takae didn't have it in her to chase him all the way into the waiting room. Takae hated the waiting room. To think the former Medical Director's Office is now in this state, she'd say. It was just so pitiful that she hated to even set foot inside.

Leaving Takae stranded at the other side of the door, Toshio sighed.

If someone wished to be revered as a director, to have a two-stone handicap up on everyone else, to affirm their power and influence, who the hell would come back to this village? If someone were really after that, there were plenty more lucrative positions than a medical director of a tiny hospital deep in the mountains out there for the taking in the world, but Takae didn't seem to grasp that.

No, not just Takae, thought Toshio as he left the hospital. Toshio's father was also a man who didn't understand as much. Toshio wasn't denying that standing and fame had their value. But, what kind of status really came with being a medical director of a hospital that was really only the size of a clinic in Sotoba of all places? In the first place it was just another term for another medic, so slapping on "-al director" was a joke. It wasn't any different than being the old man at any personal shop, he couldn't help but thing. They didn't call them directors, so why not just call him "Boss" like the proprietors of the village's shops? --Toshio had always thought as much.

Indeed, the Ozaki Hospital did once used to be the home of the one and only physician in the area. In an era when there wasn't even a doctor in the town of Mizobe, there was apparently even an inn for patients who had to travel a long way for examinations. But, that was an era long past. Patients who were in critical condition called an ambulance. If you went to the town of Mizobe, there was

a General hospital with well regulated medical equipment, and even a National Hospital. If you rushed, you could make it to the University Hospital in under three hours.

The Ozakis were left behind in the small territory that was Sotoba, where the Ozakis were revered and caught up in feeling like bigwigs with their say in village governmental affairs. If that was really what someone wanted, they'd be better off transferring to an area with more of a regional advantage, expanding their hospital. This was the end result of being unable to throw away the lifestyle that came with being honored by the bunch from the cloistered little village.

He was a frog in a shallow well. That's what he thought, every time he stepped into the showy Director's Office. He was a man who believed in an influence that had long faded, who believed that all of the people around him believed and thought the same way that he did. Never mind that he was nothing more than a simple doctor anymore, the man refused to believe that he was an ordinary doctor then, and still going on refusing to accept as much now was his wife.

(What a strange story....)

That was the one way he didn't want to live. ---No matter what.

As he pulled up to the Shimizu's house, having heard the engine, the entryway door opened. The gate lamp was out, the sliding storm doors were drawn and the curtains tightly closed. At a glance, it appeared to be a house asleep.

"Doctor---Thank you." Shimizu Hiroko stepped out to meet him, seeming to cower into herself, her voice hushed low. She pulled on his hand to hurry him into the house, looked around to confirm that the neighbors didn't see that Toshio had come, then quickly---but without a sound, closed the door.

"I'm sorry about the hour."

Even inside the entryway, Shimizu kept his voice low.

"Where's Megumi-chan?"

"On the second floor."

Toshio stepped up from the entryway, straight towards the second floor, setting foot on the stairway when Shimizu stopped him.

"Uhm."

"Is there something wrong?"

"Actually," said Shimizu, looking away. "Somehow, Megumi's been acting off.... Even if we ask if something happened yesterday, we haven't been able to find out anything. She won't give any real answers, and even if you yell, I can't be sure if she can even hear or not."

As if offering a preview on how things would be on the second floor, Shimizu's voice was low. "Maybe, it isn't that she's sick,... how to put it, I've been thinknig it might be something mental, but."

Toshio knew his meaning and nodded. In other words, Shimizu had the same worry that Takae had. Something might have been done to his daughter's body. His daughter might have been suffering from a blow to her psyche. That was all the more reason to hide from nearby eyes, to avoid bringing her out to the hospital, and no doubt the reason they called Toshio out so late at night.

"For now, I'll examine her," Toshio showed a mindful smile. "We might find something out if we do a medical examination."

"Yes,.... That's right. Please." It's the first room on the second floor."

"Excuse me," TOSHIO said, heading up to the second floor. Shimizu and Hiyoko followed, as if holding their breath.

Megumi's room had a nameplate suiting a young girl. Looking at the name 'Megumi' written in bubbly letters, Toshio gave a light knock on the door before opening. In the room lined with stuffed animals and trinkets, Megumi was lied on the bed by the window.

"Megumi-chan," Toshio started, seeing that her eyes were open. "What's wrong. I hear you're not doing good?"

The bedside lamp was all that lit her face. 'Sorry, but I'll have to turn on the lights', Toshio said as he flipped on the lights. As the florescent light filled the room, by looking at Megumi's vacant expression, it was clear that her face was drained of color.

"You're pretty pale. ---How're you feeling?"

As Toshio knelt at her bedside, Megumi blinked as if blinded by the light. Beyond that, she showed no particular response.

"They say yuo're not eating? No appetite?"

Though Toshio spoke to her she didn't respond. As if she were half asleep, her gaze fell to Toshio but it didn't appear to be a gaze with any awareness.

Now then, Toshio monologued to himself. Is this a real case of psychological torpor, or---is it a performance?

Megumi was a frequent patient at the hospital. Her chest hurt or her stomach hurt, she'd say kicking up a fuss, when there was generally nothing found wrong with her that required any treatment. While there was objectively speaking nothing wrong with her, whether there even was subjectively to the patient herself was a frequent cause of fights between Megumi and the Shimizus, since they seemed to occur whenever something she didn't like came up at school. If there was something wrong with her from time to time, it was never enough to require treatment, yet Megumi would act all the more like she had a grave disease. Like she was hoping for it. At times like these, Toshio would affix "a very mild case of" to whatever appropriate disease, and give her vitamins or some other harmless prescription. He expected it, but was that it this time?

"Cold?" Toshio asked, as he saw Megumi was wearing summer bedclothes. Megumi blinked, but offered no particular response. He took her hand to take her pulse but there was no fever. If anything, she was cool.

"You don't have a fever. The AC might be a little strong, huh?" He said while counting her pulse. A little fast. Checking her blood pressure, it was pretty low. He lifting up her eyelid to see the mucous membrane color. Just like her face, it seemed to have lost some of its hue.

"Open up your mouth." He lightly gently opened her jaw, and she did at least leave it open. There didn't seem to be anything especially wrong with her tonsils or the inside of her mouth, but as expected the healthy red color was lacking.

"Looks like anemia. ---Are you on your period?"

Even looking her in the eye when he asked, she didn't answer. She isn't, Hiroko answered.

"Open the front a bit."

Toshio took out his stethoscope. Megumi of course had no response, so Hiroko hurried over and undid Megumi's Pajama top. Toshio felt with the stethoscope, while at the same time examining Megumi's body. Traces of insect bites, small scratches and bruises, probably from when she fell on the mountain. He couldn't see anything that particularly seemed to be the aftereffects of anything violent. Just in case, he checked the palpitations down to her abdomen but there wasn't anything especially wrong there, and on her color-deprived white skin, he saw neither wounds nor bruises.

"She isn't on her period, you had said. Her there been abnormal bleeding or abnormal discharge?"

Toshio turned to look at Hiroko. Hiroko shook her head, seeming bewildered. "No... No, I don't think so."

"I see." Toshio smiled. "Probably Anemia. Just in case, I'll run a blood test. I'll need to take some blood."

That was what finally got a response. Indeed, it was an aggravated nod.

"Is there anywhere that hurts?"

"No..."

"Sleepy?"

"I am very, sleepy...."

"I see," Toshio nodded as he pricked her with the needle and took only the necessary amount of blood. "We won't know until we look over the test results but, I think it's probably anemia."

Toshio turned to face Shimizu.

"Anemia, is it?"

"It's pretty severe anemia. It happens a lot in young girls. ---Is Megumi-chan on a diet?"

At that, Hiroko nodded with a strained smile. "This girl, she's always on a diet, so..."

"That's probably part of it. Then there's this heat. There are times she probably just has a juice or some ice cream and doesn't have a proper meal, I'm sure. That can make anemia strike. We'll know for sure when the results come back but, well, in the mean time, I don't think you need to worry too much."

"Is that really true..."

"Beyond that, nothing looks too severe. Well, if she didn't already have it yesterday, when the anemia did strike, this heat might have gotten to her and caused cerebral anemia, or something like that." Saying that, Toshio looked into Shimizu's eyes, his words steeped in meaning. "There's nothing to worry about."

Shimizu had a sudden look of understanding. "Is that so...."

"When anemia is bad, you can feel wiped out, and the tendency towards torpor develops. You can sleep and sleep and still be sleepy. There are no bumps on her head, and it doesn't seem like she had a strong blow to her head or anything when she fell, so the reason she's spaced out is probably the anemia, too." Toshio smiled. "Anyway, I'll write a prescription for some vitamins, so please come

pick them up tomorrow. Then in a week, we'll see how she is. If before then her condition changes, please bring her in."

Good grief, Shimizu let out, along with a smile that seemed slightly wry. "Honestly, this girl gets people riled up. I am sorry, for calling you out so late."

"I don't mind. Aren't we glad it was nothing?"

"Yeah. I am sorry for the trouble over nothing."

Toshio turned to look back at Megumi.

"It's not that I don't understand a maiden's heart or anything, but if you're going to diet, don't do it to an unhealthy point. Whatever else you do, not eating 'cause you want to lose weight won't work. If you don't count calories and do it in a more measured way, the only result is going to be hurting yourself."

Megumi blinked as if it were bright, then gave a small nod.

"If you do that and your body breaks down, you'll be hospitalized and have nutrients pushed on you, you know. With that you'll gain 10 kilos in no time."

"Meanie," Megumi murmured with a small voice and a smile. Toshio smiled and stood. He nodded to the obviously relieved Shimizu and Hiroko.

"Take care."

sinnesspiel

Links to Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Translation Notes

Chapter 6 - 3

*Shimizu-san and his wife are at the **police box**, people are gathering.*

In Japan there are police boxes called koban that are not stations with call centers or dispatchers, but where police are always stationed, either to respond to a nearby situation, to take lost and found items, to give directions, or to generally keep the peace. Sotoba has no station, but Takami does have a police box, which is like his personal station. They're considerably more spacious than the old European ones which are standing room only. They tend to have tea and such for anemics who have fainted, etc.

[An example from Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Though, out in the country where space isn't at such a premium, Sotoba's may be more like this example, also from

[Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Chapter 6 - 4

Haori

- A type of Japanese cloth overcoat.

[Example image](#) from www.kimonosource.com.

*With his body turned so that Takae wouldn't see from behind him, he raised his hand in an **apologetic gesture**.*

Forearm up, hand in front of the face as if doing a karate chop, often with a slight bow forward.

[Examples](#) with [Misato](#)

from Evangelion. A more

generic example.

Chapter 6 - 6

*...a man wearing a fire brigade **happi coat** turned to face him.*

Another Japanese cloth coat, often with large crests on the back to identify a team, unit, group or shop the wearer belongs to. Typically associated with labor workers, but they do have their place in traditional, formal situations as well.

Example image.

*"If it was me, I'd spread it all over right away though. At the end of the day, I'm a **Hachigoro** at heart."*

Hachigoro was a name frequently used in

Rakugo

, which are story telling acts performed by a single person doing all of the voices, and usually with minimal or no narration. While the name was used often it was never necessarily the same character, so much as it was a stock name, Hachigoros did have some specific reoccurring tendencies, such as pretending to be more high class or intelligent than he was and (trying to) speak and act in a classy manor, perhaps imitating another he'd seen use such social skills to their benefit, while ultimately being a buffoon. Hachigoro was considered a samurai name, and thus back then it was ironic to have someone associated with the noble classes being the butt of so many jokes, but on the other hand the character is often considered very easy to relate to because of his simpleton nature, and usually did not actually (or at least, did not honestly) have high status or position, frequently being a laborer or layabout. This has made the name associated with fairly polite every-man types and Joe Blows.

In short, Ikebe may be a monk, but he's saying he's pretty ordinary and likes to talk as much as anyone. Incidentally, a famous Hachigoro rakugo happens to be about the time when he pretend to be a monk simply because a temple lacked a head priest and he happened to be bald.

sinnesspiel

1

"Hey, why do we light a fire?" Katou Yuusuke asked his grandmother, who was bent over the road beside their house. It was already starting to get dark out. Along the road that followed the mountain stream, he could see yellow lights dotting here and there. They were the lights of flames. His grandmother Yukie was leaning over the road just like the others from the neighborhood, lighting a pile of wood chips on the asphalt on fire.

"We do this to welcome our ancestors. That's because today is Obon. They're all in the mountains, so without a sign like this, they might not come back."

"Our an-ses-tors?"

"Grandma's father and mother and their mothers and fathers, people like that."

Yuusuke's eyes widened a little. "Grandma had a father and mother, too?"

Yukie let out a light laugh. "Well, I must have! People don't come from trees, after all."

"From trees?"

"It means if there is a person, they must have certainly had a father and a mother. That's how everyone is born. I'm saying there are fathers and mothers all the way back."

"And those people, where are they?"

"In the mountains. They're allll dead, so they're in their graces in the mountains."

Yuusuke stiffened. "Dead people? They're coming back?"

"Yes. During Obon the lid comes off of Hell. Then they can return home," Yukie said, smiling at her grandson. "Yuu-chan's mother will be coming back, too."

She was a bright, cheerful daughter-in-law. She had a frank manner of speaking, one that could certainly frustrate Yukie, but looking back she could only think she had indeed been a fine wife. She didn't dislike the business nor was she afraid of work. She worked at double Yukie's pace, swift in all she did, and while she did make mistakes for that, it was hard to hold it against her. The girl was the very picture of health; it was unthinkable that she would go first. She was burly, with thick arms. When those arms at some point became smaller, when Yukie had said to her, have you been losing weight, she smiled proudly. It's nothing to be happy about, you're too thin---by the time she had thought that, it was already too late.

Yukie looked on as Yuusuke stared into the welcoming fire. Yuusuke had started primary school. He was smaller than the others but he was a healthy boy.

(Come back, have a look at him for yourself...)

Her son who had only just begun to walk after her at last back then was now already this big.

Yuusuke compared the welcoming fire to those surrounding. Maybe he was looking for his mother in the darkness. Thinking such with compassion, she gave a lonely smile only for Yuusuke to suddenly rush over to the water bucket.

"Grandma, let's put them out!"

"---Yuusuke!" Shocked, wondering what he was saying, she stopped his hands on the bucket.

"Let's put them out! Please!"

"If we put the fire out, your mom won't come back, will she?"

"But!" Yuusuke cried at Yukie when his breath stopped. Over his grandmother's shoulder, as she bent over the small fire, in the darkness, he saw a white shadow.

(If we don't put out the fire....)

It swayed and grew bit by bit. Before he could grip the handle of the bucket, it grew bigger still. It was across the road, coming closer to the open air flames. Yuusuke hid behind his grandmother, clinging to her. The faded handle of the bucket warped in Yuusuke's hand.

--When the dead return, that's a ghost.

Yuusuke was fixated on the shadow that was approaching. Sneaking footsteps approached, until finally that tall figure's feet stepped into the light of the fire.

(Oni are coming down from the mountains.)

Yuusuke shrunk behind his grandmother's back, still unable to take his eyes from the approaching shadow, watching it pass by from behind that back.

White clothing, white pants, a white face atop the slender figure.

"....Good evening." It said, with a smile. Yuusuke saw it as a demonic smile. Clinging to his grandmother's clothing, he took a step backwards but his grandmother showed no signs of fleeing, looking up and then bowing her head.

"Good evening," said Yukie, turning back to face Yuusuke. "Yuusuke, where's your 'good evening'?"

Yuusuke, still looking up at the man, shook his head.

"Now be polite and give a proper greeting," Yukie chided, standing up. She pulled Yuusuke forward, with a light nod to the man.

"It's a good Bon night, isn't it."

It is, the man smiled. Yukie examined the figure. He was in about his mid-forties, probably? He was slender, but still a man whose body line suggested dignity, in a suit that flattered his form. It may have been linen, and it was well tailored. His was an unfamiliar face but she knew who he was right away. He had no necktie but his clothing was color coordinated, adorned in leather shoes of a brown hue that went well with the linen suit. Of the villagers, there were none who would dress like this for walking the village at night. ---At least until now, there hadn't been.

"By chance, are you Kanemasa?" Yukie looked up at the Western mountain. "You are the good people who moved in there, aren't you?"

Yes, the man smiled with a light nod.

"Are you taking a walk?"

"I'd thought I'd seen open air fires about and recalled that it was Obon. I had completely forgotten," the man said, surveying his surroundings. Soon, his gaze returned down to Yukie. "I am Kirishiki Seishirou. It was a pleasure to meet you tonight."

"Oh my, likewise."

"Might this be your grandson?"

Seishirou looked at Yuusuke cowering behind Yukie as if he were leering over him. Yuusuke turned into her arm and tucked into her side as if to run from that gaze.

"Yuusuke, where are your manners?"

Good evening, a child's voice could just barely be heard to say, while he still refused to budge from Yukie's shadow.

"You'll have to excuse him. The child has a terrible fear of strangers."

Seishirou smiled. "No, that's simply how children are, I suppose."

"Do you have children, Kirishiki-san?"

"I do have a daughter who has turned thirteen. My daughter as well is shy of strangers. ---Yuusuke-kun? A pleasure."

Being stared at by the man, Yuusuke all the more tightly gripped at Yukie's clothing. On that exceedingly white face, and beneath those slender eyebrows, the skin about and beneath his eyes made no motions of a smile, even while the corners of his thin lips rose. It was a bad type of smile, or at least Yuusuke thought so.

(It's because of the open fire.)

They did something as crazy as lighting fires to lead ghosts to the house.

(Even though if it comes down from the mountains, it's obviously an Oni...)

sinnesspiel

2

"Mom, I'm going to Megumi's!" Kaori called to her mother in the kitchen.

"Oh, a get-well visit?"

Yup, Kaori nodded. "I have a book to bring back to her, too."

"I see. There are some grapes in the refrigerator, bring those with you."

"It'll be all right."

"You can't go empty handed. I bought them as an offering for the holiday, anyway."

As told by her mother, Kaori opened the fridge. Inside were a box of chilled muscat grapes. Taking them out and bringing them together with the book, Kaori put on the slipper by the kitchen door and headed out. In the cooling night wind, people could be seen here and there standing about after lighting the welcoming fires.

Love popped his face out from his dog house wanting to go along, but Kaori shook her head and walked along the roads at night. The tap tap of her sandals mingled with the voices of the insects behind her.

Night in the village were generally dark but that wasn't the case at all in Kaori's neighborhood. As soon as she left the house, there was the Ootsuka Sawmill lumberyard, and beyond that wide field was the national highway. The highway was between that plot and the Kusunoki Stand. The bright light from the gas station shone undeterred, lighting up the surroundings, much more reliably than

any telephone pole street lights could have.

The cooling night air was very settling and calming. Easy going, she passed by the lumberyard when, illuminated by the light of the gasoline stand, she could see Ootsuka Yasuyuki pointing towards the lumber. Yasuyuki was already past thirty, much older than Kaori, but he felt like a big brother figure from around the neighborhood. Maybe it was because ever since her little brother Akira was young, he'd let them come over and lpay incessantly. That Yasuyuki was pointing to the mountain of lumber, talking to a figure beside him about something. Even though it's Obon, he's working this late, thought Kaori as her walking slowed, when she caught sight of the woman she had never seen before at Yasuki's side.

Yasuyuki was still unwed. He had a good temperament but the problem was that he was shy, so she had heard that the little old lady from Ootsuka Lumber had said. He was looking to be set up for a marriage with somebody but, with that said, the problem was with who? The age to be doing marriage interviews is in your twenties, so it's believed.

Marriage interviews and weddings, maybe it was because those talks still lingered in her mind, and because the woman was dressed in her best. She was in a white summer-knit one piece, and a transparent top over that. In white heels and a white bag, her hair was loosely put up. Her earrings glistened in the light.

(She's beautiful...)

Kaori's feet stopped. Of course her facial features were gorgeous; how to put it--she felt very sophisticated. Like an actress who would be on TV.

Maybe Yasuyuki noticed that she had been thoughtlessly just staring at them, as he turned towards her. He smiled shyly.

"Hiya, Kaori-chan. On an errand?"

"Going to Megumi-chan's."

Is that right, he said, almost blushing as he motioned to the woman beside him. "This here is the Madame of the Kirishikis. She says her name is Chizuru-san. You know, from Kanemasa."

"Heh? Kaori murmured. This was her? Then, Yasuyuki definitely wouldn't propose to her. With Yasuyuki seeming so completely flustered, she suddenly got the feeling it was a shame. It'd have been good if he could have gotten engaged.

"Good evening," Chizuru greeted. Something was coquettish about her, like a star who would be on TV, like she'd thought.

"I just met her over there a while ago. This seems to be the first time the Madame of the Kirishikis has seen a lumberyard."

Hmm, Kaori mused. When a smile rose on Chizuru's face as Kaori received her gaze, she was suddenly conscious of herself, in a childish T-shirt and culottes with an elastic waste-band. Somehow, it was very embarrassing.

"This girl is from the neighborhood, she's called Tanaka Kaori. Right now, she's in middle school."

As Chizuru's eyes narrowed, Kaori became more and more embarrassed. You could even call her timid. If she had at least put her hair up or something. As it was, she had barely just run a comb through it.

"She's a really good girl. --Madame, do you have children?"

"I have a daughter. She is in her first year of middle school but, unfortunately, her body is weak, so going to school is..."

"Oh yeah? That must be difficult."

"Thanks to that, she's very shy of strangers. If she's able to become more healthy here, it would be good if she could make friends, but." Saying this, Chizuru smiled towards Kaori. "If you'd like, please do come by sometime."

"Ah... Yes. Likewise. Thanks." Kaori said, chewing out a response, hastily bowing her head and leaving as if running away.

(...What a surprise.)

While running clack-clack ahead, she turned back to look at the lumber yard. Yasuyuki was, face red, talking to Chizuru about something.

There really are people like that, she realized. She was like a wife in a TV drama. And furthermore.

(Her body is weak...)

A first year middle school girl. The same age as Akira. She probably didn't go to school. She was really like the star of a TV drama.

Still flustered, trotting through the night streets, if she had gone any further she'd have went right past Megumi's family's house. She hurried her limbs to a stop, hurrying towards the entryway. Though she haf always gone around to the kitchen door, tonight for some reason or other she felt like visiting from the entryway. For what was practically the first time, she stood at the entryway, pushing the doorbell.

There was an immediate response, the door opening. Megumi's mother's eyes were wide.

"Oh my, it's Kaori-chan. I thought we had a guest."

Kaori felt herself blushing. She always opened the back door and called out. There were even times when she'd just call out and go on up on her own. So she herself didn't understand very well why she was in the mood to ring the doorbell.

"Uhm.... how is Megumi-chan's condition? This is a get well visit. Uhm, this is from Mom,"

Kaori presented the box of grapes. As Megumi's mother accepted them, she murmured in surprise. "Oh, well. Thank you. What's wrong, Kaori-chan, you're so stiff."

"Well... this is a get-well visit...."

"Well. It wasn't such a big deal. It was only anemia. Anyway, go ahead on up."

"Sorry for intruding," Kaori said formally, stepping into the entryway. She slipped off her shoes and, even while told to go upstairs, she nodded, and headed to the second floor. Was this always the kind of house she had, she thought while going up the steps.

Megumi's house was, compared to Kaori's, very new. The walls were mortar and plaster but adorned with wallpaper, and the floor was distinctly western in style. Megumi's mother, being a fastidious person, kept the house well cleaned, with flowers arranged in the entryway, and small trinkets lining the shelves. Kaori had always thought of Megumi's house like this, as a place that had felt very stylish.

And yet, tonight, it looked different. Megumi's mother didn't go as far as to wear casual night gowns like Kaori's mother but, she was indeed dressed comfortably and normally, and she had no makeup on. The inside of the house, too, if you looked closely, was already starting to show the colors of age, and the florists's decorations, too, seemed somewhat jumbled up.

With a complicated feeling, she climbed the stairs to Megumi's room, where there was a stuffed animal beneath the bedroom door nameplate, holding onto a dried flower but, something about that, too, seemed to have a layer of dust, as if it, too, were going terribly downhill.

She knocked and opened the door. The truth was that Kaori had always admired the perfectly western room of Megumi's, overflowing with girlish little knickknacks and yet, tonight under the florescent lights, it seemed terribly washed out. It was a completely ordinary room. The only thing different from Kaori's old worn out room was just that it was filled with newer things, nothing more---

"Megumi-chan, how are you feeling?"

She entered the room and came by the bedside. It didn't seem like

Megumi was asleep, her eyes were open, with a gloomy look.

"You're looking pale. Are you okay?"

Megumi gave a sluggish nod, but she might have just been half asleep.

Kaori pulled out a small stool that a stuffed animal had been sitting on, moved the stuffed animal out of the way and sat. Considering the strange lack of vividness in the room tonight, she looked at Megumi, thinking that this was what Megumi had been staring at all this time. Kaori had come to think of Megumi's room as just amazing but maybe to Megumi it had always looked to be these colors. So, she always went up and down that hill, always looked up to that house. Certainly there was no comparison to this house and Kaori's house with that house at Kanemasa. Although, there was no doubt that the "something" that this home seemed to be faking was a "something" that house genuinely possessed.

The voices of the insects rode in on the wind through the open window. Kaori peered into Megumi's face, that seemed somehow so vastly far off.

"So, like, it was really amazing. Just now, who do you think I met?"

Megumi didn't answer. Still, her gaze, if only that, shifted towards her.

"They said their name was Kirishiki. The people from that mansion. I met the lady of the house. She's called Chizuru-san. She was such a pretty person!"

Megumi's shoulder had only a twitch of movement.

"It's the first time I'd seem someone put on makeup and earrings, even though she was just walking through the village! But, it really suited her. It didn't feel flashy like, it was more what you'd call elegant, maybe?"

"I know...."

Eh, Kaori looked at Megumi. Megumi's expression seemed to possess a certain bite to it.

"I know... at least, that much."

Kaori blinked as Megumi wore a thin smile. Some part of her expression seemed to be scoffing at Kaori.

"She's beautiful.... so, very beautiful...."

Kaori tilted her head, watching Megumi's facial expression attentively.

sinnesspiel

3

Miwako knelt over the welcoming fire, fixedly watching as the flame burned out. Seishin watched over his mother's form much the same way.

They may have been a temple family, but they still had ancestral spirits. Miwako dutifully set out to meet them every year. In Sotoba, they burned firs rather than hemp. Burning chips of firs released the visitors from within the firs. Miwako set out beside the welcoming fire a horse made of cucumber and a cow made of eggplant, facing the main wing of the house.

Every year, each time he looked at the small ride-able animals, he thought it'd have been fine to have them facing the outdoors. It was said they were positioned so one could ride on their backs towards the house but they could also serve the function of being ridden back when they returned to the grave just as well.

Miwako remained crouching, without a word. What she was so silently caught up in thoughts about each year, he didn't know. Perhaps it was her own deceased father, or maybe her eldest brother who died young. Even from before Seishin had come to look over the welcoming fire with her, Miwako was like this, eternally silent with her thoughts. Kneeling and looking only at the flame, she was occluded to him. Thus somehow, he had the feeling that she was not thinking of the dead of this family, but of the one whose homecoming was some other place. She was not thinking of the spirits invited to this home, but to the dead being invited elsewhere, the dead that she had no right to invite to this house. --- Whenever experience this feeling, Seishin thought of how while he knew Muroi Miwako quite well, he knew nothing of Yamamura Miwako.

Seishin was pleased with the village's Bon. The families here and there, their street corners lit with flame, had their family altars visible through transparent reed screens, lit with candles and Bon lanterns resembling revolving lamps. In the village, the thirteenth was the welcoming or Mukae Bon, the fourteenth was memorial services, the fifteenth was the dance of Bon Odori, and the sixteenth was the send off or Okuri Bon. Welcome, pray, comfort, see off. ---- The dead awoke. In the midst of the days of toiling to one's own death, on this night, when the forgotten dead had life breathed into them together with the welcoming flame, once living beings and the days they left behind were all contained in the feeble embers; in other words, they were revived within the light of the Bon lanterns.

From behind he heard a small sigh like sound. As he turned to look back, Miwako scooped a ladle of water from the bucket. She gathered the small horse and cow in her arms and stood.

"I will be returning ahead."

There was his mother's usual face. It was not a motherly face, but merely the face of the one known as "mother" to him.

Seishin nodded and saw his mother off, then looked down at the road leading to the shrine. There was one less light, now. Captivated by the night winds, he idly walked along through the mountain gate. He walked halfway down the stone steps, then sat. The lights he could see far off became faint and then vanished.

The dead revived and returned to their nostalgic homes. To where they belonged. As for him,

He left behind a hollow grave. There he was embraced in pitch black darkness awaiting impatiently the emissary. Return to your own resting place, the earth wailed. In a betrayal of the fate of divine providence, why did the sin laden earth wish for such so resolutely?

Seishin smiled faintly and shook his head. As he thought to stand

to return home, he saw a white shadow yonder on the night road.

At last from before him, he saw a white, pale outline of a human form.

It came again tonight from the grave.

Seishin watched over it. Soon it revealed itself as a small statured person. Drawing closer with steps lacking in destination the figure came close enough to be seen as a young girl, stopping as if she had noticed Seishin. Soon the girl was, with a distinct sense of purpose, walking towards him. Finally arriving at the bottom of the stone steps, she looked up at Seishin.

The manner in which she tilted her head was child-like. A hydrangea colored one piece outlined her thin frame. She seemed to be twelve or thirteen. Her long hair settled over her thin shoulders with a soft, silky sound.

"---Muroi-san?"

Seishin nodded. He had never seen the girl before. She didn't have the aura of one from Sotoba. Who it was, he quickly deduced.

With no hint of bashfulness to her, the girl casually ascended the stone stairway. She rose until she was able to meet evenly the seated Seishin's gaze, her feet coming to a stop.

"You are Muroi-san, aren't you?" The girl said. Maybe it was because she could not bask in the sun; her skin was white like wax.

"That's right, but..."

The girl smiled and folded her slender arms behind her back. "I rather like your works."

Having that said to him out of the blue, Seishin's eyes widened. For a moment, he was at a loss for words.

The girl inclined her head like a puppet.

"You are Muroi-san, yes? Of

Minotaur."

"Ah... yes. But," Seishin took a long, hard look at the young girl's face in bewilderment. "You've read it?"

"Yes. I have read it. Is it strange?"

"No," Seishin forced a smile. "Thank you. I think that you are probably my youngest reader."

She made as if to suppress a giggle.

"Oh yes, there were some difficult words, too," she added in with blunt, fast talk. "But, I do believe that any human can understand the feeling that they have been abandoned by God."

"Do you like books?"

"Oh yes. I like them. I've read many," said the little girl, adding further. "Indiscriminately. The truth is your book, too, was one I had borrowed from my father's shelves. There were six long novels, and two volumes of short stories. If that is all of them, I have read them all."

"That's amazing." Seishin showed a smile, but inside, he was dismayed. "That's all of them. This is the first I've met someone who's read all of them."

"Also there have been times I've seen your essays and the like in magazines. Last year, you wrote about this village, didn't you?"

Seishin blinked. "You knew it was this village?"

"I at least knew that it was where the author lived. When looking at your other books' curriculum vitae, a person may be able to suppose whereabouts you live, don't you think? All that was left was to use the name of the temple in that curriculum vitae and to properly look over a map."

"I don't think this is the case but, ---you didn't look for me like

that, did you?"

The little girl smiled. "The truth is, one of my father's acquaintances had brought it up. That there was an author in the village. And it had turned out to be Muroi-san. I promise you though, that I had read your works before the little old man of Takemura had told me this."

"---I see. Thank you."

"In reading over the magazine, I found that essay. A village like a shrine, it had a nice feeling. I felt I'd want to try living there," said the little girl, adding on. "I am sure that Father had thought the same. It was when I had found the essay and presented it to Father that he began to talk seriously about moving."

"That's... an honor," so he said, but the truth was that he was disturbed. The little girl fixedly watched over Seishin.

"You're troubled, it's written on your face."

"That's not it. Just--- all of this this is really something unusual for me."

"All of this?"

Seishin forced a smile. "Suddenly meeting a reader."

"Is it? If I am the first, then it is an honor."

"Without a doubt, you are the first."

The girl gave a simmering smile. "I have been very interested in you, Muroi-san. I'd hoped to try to meet you."

"You're probably disappointed I don't fit your image?"

"That's true," said the little girl, looking Seishin over again from top to bottom. "At first I had thought you were an unexpectedly normal person, to be honest? I mean, I had the feeling that Muroi-san was the type who would have a horn or a tail, after all."

"Why?"

"Because those are the humans you write about. Stories of those abandoned by God, right? So perhaps Muroi-san has a horn too, I had thought, like a Minotaur. So, I was sad that you had no horns," Seishin smiled at that girlish way of phrasing it, and was frozen by the words that followed. "---But, even if you don't have horns, you have scars. I am satisfied with that."

Seishin stared at the little girl's face.

"...You..."

"I'm Sunako. Remember that."

"Sunako-chan, you..."

"Don't add -chan. I really hate being called that!"

Seishin closed his mouth. The little girl was really doll like, the way disgust warped her face, and unable to think what else to call her, Seishin had forgotten what it was he was going to say to her. Without thinking, he'd gripped at the wristwatch over his left wrist.

"I will tell you something, Muroi-san. The little girl set off, speaking in a small voice. "A person won't die just from cutting their wrist."

Seishin had no response. Sunako's upper half seemed to revitalize, a smile rising to her face that seemed to engulf her body. She descended lightly down the stone steps, her one piece flickering on the night road off into the distance. ---Like a phantom killer.

As if he had been struck by one attacking a random peasant to test out a new sword, Seishin watched the road down which the little girl had disappeared. There had been neither time to stand nor to call to her to stop.

"Mm, that's right," Seishin answered, however belatedly. "....I think that I probably knew that then, actually."

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4

"Ehh, the final memorial service? For Grandmother?"

Nao said, earning a nod from Yasumori Junko. The Maruyasu lumberyard was broad. The forklifts and trucks were at rest in the dead of the night, and on the plaza piled with lumber in every direction remained nothing of them but their track marks. Mixed in with those were the narrow tracks of children's bicycles.

The sawmill's lumberyard was seen as a playground by children. Summer vacation's radio exercises were scheduled at the Maruyasu sawmill lumberyard for the children in this area, and the wife of the family, Junko, had the duty of overseeing that. While it was early in the morning, it'd be a lie to say it wasn't still hot out then, but, Nao at least came with her which did make it enjoyable in a way.

The gathered children would play after their exercises were finished until the lumber yard's business hours. If nothing else, all of the lumber piled about made it so that it couldn't be said to be a place free of any dangers, so when the children were there, somebody had to be with them. With how often they came, she had all the deeper a bond with the children, and on days off they'd easily come to "borrow" her. They were attached to Junko as well as Nao, and they'd been drug out from the house countless times but, being so loved could foster love in the loved, so it wasn't all that bad.

"It's shaping up to be such a big service."

"Oh, that sounds like a lot of work," Nao said, overlooking the child who was playing around at her feet with scraps of wood.
"Susumu-chan, that's a no-no."

Nao took the sharpened wood scrap from her son's hand.

Last year, Junko had married into this Maruyasu Sawmill family from outside of the village. Nao was another wife who had come from outside the village. Nao had married into Yasumori Construction--commonly called the Contractors---which was a branch family of the Sawmill's family, Nao's husband being the far younger cousin of Junko's father-in-law. Their husbands were the same age, so they were more like brothers. Not only did the two husbands get along well, they were a head and branch family, so there was all kinds of involvement between them. On Bon or New Years or anything of that nature, all of the neighborhood relatives would get together at the Maruyasus.

Nao gathered up a collection of wood scraps that seemed safe, stacking them before her child.

"If it's her final memorial service, we'll be involved, too. We'll have to come help."

"I'm sorry, especially when it's so hot."

"We're both out in the country, we need to count on each other. But it really will be a hassle for Jun-chan, won't it? If you're saying that it's at the end of August, then Obon would have barely passed. You'll be doing this all over again, won't you?"

That's right, said Junko with a forced smile, turning back to look at the lit up house. From the tatami room where the extended family gathered flowed the noisy clamor of their drinking.

"At my house we didn't really have any relatives nearby, so this many people gathering for Obon was a complete shock. I'd never even seen a Buddhist memorial service before."

"Oh? Here, they're very strict about memorial services and divine works, aren't they? My mother-in-law, every morning, she goes to a religious service at the temple. I remember how shocked I was when I'd first heard that."

"As for me, I'd thought you only went to temples for funerals."

"Right?" Junko laughed. "Remembering all of the little customs can be a hassle but once you get used to it, you start to think it's nice in its own way, too."

"That's right."

Junko smiled. She had married from nearby but Junko was born in a more urban area, where relatives were far away, and she didn't meet with them. There wasn't even a family altar in the home then, and they didn't really even do most yearly holiday functions or events. That was all the more reason these fastidious, precise rituals were interesting and fun. Even the fuss of the family gathering together, while tiring on the one hand, made for a good sort of busy. Especially when looking at her husband and Nao's husband, she thought the way that those of the same generation were like brothers was a fine thing.

"If it's her final memorial ceremony, the people from the neighborhood will help too, so it shouldn't be such a hassle on the day itself. Now, there are the days before and after! It's a hassle when the family gets together but, well, that's how it goes," Nao said, turning her eyes to the main house with a laugh. Junko smiled.

"Then, we'll make it somehow. My Mother-in-law said to make it a grand affair, so I've been put on the spot."

"It'll be all right. Jun-chan is the reliable one!"

"Not hardly!"

"Oh? You're a fine wife. My father-in-law said so himself!"

"Really?"

"Really. I mean, it's a lot of work you do! Jun-chan, your house manages the sawmill's affairs! There are live-in workers, aren't there? And on top of that, there's Grandfather."

Ah, Junko murmured. Her husband's grandfather had been bedridden for six years now. There was helping with the business and tending to the old man's care, so with three generations living

in the household, with her grandfather and grandmother in laws, there was a lot to worry over. "It's really not so bad. It's my mother-in-law who sees to the people of the sawmill. Grandfather may be bedridden and require some help, but he isn't particularly demanding, and he doesn't get angry very often."

"Being able to look at it that way is part of what makes you great."

"Nao-san's the same, aren't you? With the young contractors living with you."

"We have a hostel. It's not as if they're really live-ins."

"Is that so?"

Caught up in trying to out-praise the other, Junko and Nao looked at each other and laughed.

There was a lot to stress over, but their family lives were going well. Having Nao so nearby was reassuring. At the marriage interview, she had agreed to live with the family when they had wed, and each couple had their own living room and kitchen, so there was nothing to be dissatisfied about in their living arrangements with the extended family. But---thought Junko, turning to look behind her.

The night sky was black, the western mountain ridge stretched out beneath it. It, or anything else for that matter, couldn't be seen up there in the night's pitch darkness, but that was where the new Kanemasa house was.

(A house like that...)

"I'd like to try living in a western style mansion like that just once too, though."

Thinking Nao had read her mind, Junko turned to look back at her, seeing Nao herself looking up at the scene behind them.

"---I just mean, it'd be nice to have a house you could do up the way you like, too."

Junko gave a firm nod. "It's not that I'm particularly unsatisfied with anything. But, even if I think I might like to set this up like this, I can't just adjust the house however I want."

"That's right. ...It must really be nice, that house even has an attic. I've always wanted an attic, you know."

Me too, Junko laughed. Nao gave Junko an impish look.

"A western mansion with an attic, why, it's like something out of a movie, isn't it? Marrying into a household like that would be like being swept up and away! Wouldn't it be picturesque, the ideal new married life?"

"I'm sure there'd be a mother-n-law like Rottenmeier-san."

"Oh, that's true," Nao said, her voice rising with a laugh. "---They have moved in, right, for sure now?"

"Looks like it. I don't know what kind of people they are, though."

"They never come out, they say. As expected for someone moving out into the countryside like this, they're strange."

They are, murmured Junko looking up at the black mountains. As she did, Nao nudged her elbow.

"---Hn?"

"Oh, wow. Speak of the devil, they say!"

Looking towards where Nao was pointing, rather nearby, was a figure at the edge of the lumberyard. Just beneath the streetlight at the entrance, a couple, man and woman, stood. With a look at their clothing it was clear at once they weren't of the village. Overall, the atmosphere they gave off was completely different. What left an impression on Junko, to say nothing of their clothing, was the way the two casually linked their arms. Anyone who would do that was surely not one of the married couples of this village. They must have noticed Junko and the others, giving an easy greeting.

"Good evening," was said in a deep baritone.

"Oh... Good evening," Nao answered, gathering her child into her arms as Junko followed up.

"Are you the good people of Kanemasa?"

The man spoke, the woman looking up at him with a smile. "Takemura-san had said something about that. That we are called Kanemasa, here."

"That's right," Nao smiled. "We have the habit of calling the territory around your house Kanemasa."

Ah, the man nodded. He was about in his mid forties. The woman with him looked to be somewhere around thirty. Junko's thoughts were flustered. How to describe them; polished? There was something artificial to them---their demeanor lacked a certain worldliness. She felt a rush of embarrassment at the sudden outburst drunken voices that could be heard in the background.

"We are the Kirishikis. It is such a pleasure," the woman said, her eyes going to the one in Nao's arms. Her head tilted, peeking at the child's face. "My, how cute. Is he your son?"

"Yes. He's Susumu. I am, uhm, Yasumori. And this here is--no, she is one of the family members of the Maruyasu lumber yard."

"Are the two of you sisters?"

"No. Jun-chan is---I'm a relative of hers. From the nearby Yasumori Construction."

As Nao spoke, there was another burst of laughter from the background. The man turned his eyes towards the main house.

"It's Obon. Our family is having a get together."

"Ah, yes. It is homecoming season, isn't it," the man said, looking to his wife. "Everyone gathers together like this, then!"

"That's right. If you don't have anywhere to return to, you're left

out. To tell the truth, I had wondered where all of those people were disappearing too, it was mysterious!"

"I thought so, too."

Junko watched the smiling couple with a suffocating feeling. It was like watching a young couple, which was to say embarrassing. There were no married couples so openly affectionate in the village. Once you were married, you were quickly engulfed in family life, and affection gave way to comfortable familiarity.

"Do the two of you have children?"

"We do have a daughter. She's already thirteen!"

"You don't look at all like you'd have a child that old."

"Thank you very much," the woman said with a bewitching smile. Junko had the feeling that she was like a whole other life form. She wasn't like a young girl, nor like a middle aged woman, she was not like any married woman she had seen before. The man was the same. He was still a man amongst men, far from any men past forty that Junko could imagine. Outside of TV dramas.

"Uhm... If you would be interested," Nao said timidly. "Would you like to come in? As you can see, it's the middle of the party, so it's a bunch of drunks, but."

Nao nudged her lightly with her elbow, leading Junko to hastily jump in.

"Oh, yeah, please! I think our family would enjoy it, too."

The man looked to his wife as if asking her.

"Oh, but we couldn't. You're in the middle of a family gathering!"

"Oh, no, don't mind at all."

The man turned to Junko. "If we could accept your hospitality at

a later date...."

"Then, please, come to our home, too," Nao said excitedly. "If you say the Contractor's place, anyone will be able to give directions. With your daughter!"

The man smiled abruptly. For a moment, Junko was startled. That smile, something about it looked terrifying. For no placeable reason, she had the feeling that something had been said that couldn't be taken back.

"Thank you so very much."

The man said, looking over Junko and Nao as if making a pledge.

"We will be coming to give our regards. Quite soon."

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5

"---From Kanemasa?"

Yuuki turned from the creole counter to face Katou Minoru. Katou ran the electronics shop beside Ichino bridge. He was a regular at creole, but today he came to say that Katou's mother and son had seen the owners of Kanemasa, in the early evening.

"It seems she spoke with Kirishikis," Katou said, disinterested. The way he spoke and carried himself, he seemed more like a scientific researcher than the proprietor of an electronics shop.

I see, Yuuki murmured. So they didn't exactly go around introducing themselves, but they did indeed step out of the house, he thought.

"What kind of people did you say they were?" Hasegawa casually prompted.

"Apparently rather stately. Like actors, my mother said, but."

"...Hmm. The day before yesterday, I met with the young man from Kanemasa---Tatsumi-kun, I think it was---and I had a good feeling about the boy."

"Speaking of the day before yesterday, it seems like there was a big fuss from Shimizu-san's place, wasn't there?"

"That's right. Tatsumi-kun helped out with that. It was good we found her safe and sound."

Katou nodded. Glass in hand, he let the sound of the saxophone flow into his ears. Katou was in his mid-thirties, and was essentially

a very peaceful, quiet, calm man.

"I hope that resolves those uncomfortable misunderstandings, though."

Hirosawa tilted his head at Yuuki's words. "Uncomfortable misunderstandings?"

Actually, Yuuki said, telling him about the cruel rumors he had overheard that night.

"Just being told that now that you've moved out here, you should come out, in itself won't resolve everything. Tatsumi-kun and Ikebe-kun both laughed it off, but I'm sure inside they didn't find it that funny."

I see, Hirosawa sighed. Inside the shop were only Hasegawa and Katou, Hirosawa and Yuuki, for a total of four people, and the melancholy silence settled over them even in a place that had been quiet to start with.

"Unity is a single word to refer to what, from another angle, is the exclusion of others after all," Hirosawa said with some restraint. "....But, there's no excuse for that."

Hasegawa nodded as well. "I see, then. That's why they've come down to the village. Unless they show their faces, they can't be sure what people are saying about them."

"If that's why, it's a shame."

Yuuki cocked his head. "But I do think it's strange. If it were me or the masters of Kanemasa, I understand that we'd be looked to with a suspicious eye. It's sad to say, that's what it is to be an outsider. But, Ikebe-kun and the Junior Monk are seen the same way, so what am I to make of that? The two of them work at the temple and are well integrated into the village's society, aren't they?"

Hirosawa gave a wry smile. "Normally, people wouldn't speak ill of the temple. That group must not have been a part of the temple parish. Probably new families in Kami-Sotoba. People who came in

the post-war period, likely."

"Would that matter?"

"That in itself is another case of the exclusion of others I'd spoke of. Sotoba has a history as a society of regional bonds, which means the sense of unity was strong. There were families that moved in after the war, but those families at the time were excluded, and in turn, those people developed hostility towards the society that rejected them. That isn't to say all of them did but it was the general pattern that they more or less fell into. To those people, the temple must have been seen as the enemy's leader, I imagine. The temple and Kanemasa, then later Ozaki were called the three pillars, were the heart of the village after all.

"Heeh."

"Originally the village was strongly united around the three pillars. So to new citizens, they'd be considered the final boss. In those days, Kanemasa was central to everyone's interests as long as they were living in Sotoba, so as long as he served as the village headman, Kanemasa would be revered with respect, and hostilities would be withheld. All the more for the Ozakis. Everyone was dependent on their care. But as for the temple, if you weren't a part of the parish, there was no point of relevance. They were an ideal target for those hostilities."

"I guess that would be the case."

"And in the Junior Monk's case, he's also a novelist, and having such a distinct side occupation is probably cause for some prejudice as well. There's no doubt he's a moody eccentric, they say. On the practical side, it's strange for any of the eldest sons in the village to be single past thirty. Especially since the Junior Monk is an only child, if the Junior Monk doesn't start a family, there will be no heirs, which will be problematic."

"Ah, that's true."

"The parishioners are worried about it themselves but the Junior

Monk is terribly delicate in some ways, so it's as if you can't really be too aggressive with him. The head monk married late himself, and he does seem to understand his own position at least, so the parishioners are probably thinking to give him just a little more time."

Hasegawa leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone. "Is that rumor true?"

"---Rumor?"

"Yes. The Junior Monk once, that is... attempted suicide, or so it's said."

Hirosawa smiled wryly. "It seems so. I don't know anything other than the rumor either, though. That may be why those around him aren't pushing too forcefully towards marriage. If they try to force anything, his nerves will snap again, which would again become problematic."

I see, Yuuki thought. The Junior Monk from the temple, while a pillar of the village, with his side job and personal history, was another form of foreign substance in a way different from Yuuki and the others.

"Is that why there are rumors of that nature?"

"More than anything, the feelings of resentment towards the temple are the strongest. The temple--while one of the three pillars of the village, is partially separated from the village in a way."

"I don't really get it."

"It's like this. When the search went out for Megumi-chan, nobody from the Ozakis or the temple family came. Ikebe-kun came from the temple but the Junior Monk and the madame certainly didn't come. Festivals are the same. The three pillars don't participate in village festivals. Traditionally, they don't take wives from the village either, nor do their daughters marry out into the village. The Murois only have one line in the village, as do the Ozakis. That's what it means when they're said to be central to the village but

separated. They're especially important, you could say."

"Important, is it?"

Hirosawa nodded and pointed to the north. "Halfway up the northern mountain is the temple. And in the western mountain is Kanemasa, and between them, Ozaki."

"Muroi, Kanemasa and Ozaki's lots are at different levels of height. The temple is on the highest grounds, the hospital the lowest. And that's how it is to the village in terms of their social standing as well."

Heeh, Yuuki murmured.

"The doctor being third feels strange to me. In a sense, aren't the lives of the village in their hands?"

"It's a long standing custom with quite a bit of history. This used to be the temple's dominion, you see, and into this territory came wood workers to establish the village. In order to be a point of contact for the wood workers who had settled here, they opened that temple. Later, when the temple's territory was disseminated, it became an independent temple from the head. As the villages were in a sense leasing the land from the temple, and with the Edo system in place where all commoners had to register with a temple, everyone was included in the temple parish. If a monk from the temple didn't deliver a prayer for the dead so that one could move on, then, why, it was as if you couldn't even die. It seems in the past the temple had also served as the public office with the family registers, so the temple had life, death, and land--really daily life itself in their grasp."

"Ah, I see."

"From birth to death, you were in the temple's palm. That's why, while it doesn't seem you can say as much of it today, in the past, well, the temple's influence was broad. That land was leased in one chunk by Kanemasa from the temple and split amongst the villagers. Which house would have how many rice fields, which territory did the mountains belong to; these distributions were the

duties of Kanemasa, and Kanemasa would collect the dues and the rent for the territories."

"I see, so that's why the temple is first and Kanemasa is second. If you weren't in the temple and Kanemasa's good graces, you couldn't get by."

Hirosawa smiled. "That's how it is. ---Well, that isn't quite all. Sotoba had, until fairly recent years, an organization called the Sotoba-Kou."

"Sotoba-Kou---from what we learned in history class, that kind of Kou?"

"That's right. Kanemasa was the representative of the Kou. The land was borrowed from the temple by the Kou. That was divided among the people by Kanemasa as the representative of the Kou. The collection of rent and the division of the land, the delegations of the Kou, and the yearly rent negotiations were all the duty of Kanemasa."

"In other words, price bargaining?"

"I suppose so. Kanemasa wan't a company per-say, they were ultimately on the side of the villagers, as the leaders of a Kou. Then with the rental fees decided on, Kanemasa would go about gathering them and present them to the temple. The temple would keep a portion of that set aside, as emergency funds for development."

"Funds for development?"

"Yes. This was money that, in the case of a calamity or disaster or crop failure, could be loaned to the village as a Buddhist public work of sorts---in case the general public had a need, the money given as alms could be loaned to the Kou interest free. The villagers made offerings of gratitude for this, which in turn repaid the loan over a long period. There's a sluice below the highway, isn't there? The Mizuguchi dam was engineered to collect irrigation water for the crops, and it seems like it was built with that developmental fund, during the Edo period."

"Heeh...."

"Therefore, it's not simply a matter of fear. You could call it a debt of gratitude. The temple and Kanemasa were always running a three legged race together, to support the village. The ones to construct a hospital, to invite a physician, were the temple and Kanemasa. This was a time when even the town of Mizobe didn't have anything resembling a hospital, either. The temple couldn't very well loan the land out to each villager directly. Between the temple and the villagers was the house of Kanemasa, always building good will as a third party, so that it could be done at all; the village came into being with that good will as its foundation. That's why the people of the village even now can't abandon their respect for the temple and Kanemasa."

"I see..."

"Now that's no longer so much the case but our present day community center was constructed with the donations of the three pillars of the village, and Sotoba's school districts were decided on by a three-person committee, so at heart, nothing's really changed. In that case the third party isn't Kanemasa but the Tamo head family, though."

"Haa."

"In the past, it was Muroi, Kanemasa and Ozaki. By the old system, Kanemasa, as the village headman, would take a vote at the village assembly. Kanemasa had one vote in terms of the decisions of the government, seeking an agreement between the three strongest figures of the village. The village elder had one vote, and Muroi and Ozaki each had one vote. If either Muroi or Ozaki were opposed, it could still be approved with two votes. But, if both Muroi and Ozaki were to vote no, then by two votes it would be vetoed, and sent back to the headman as the representative of the Diet. --Well, in truth, it would be closer to say they met and discussed it over further meetings but, that was the system that we had. Now we don't have the village assembly but the district assembly. The name has changed but the system is the same. In the end, the three head figures make all final judgments and

determinations. Kanemasa is no longer in the village, so the district assembly's chairman serves as the third in Kanemasa's place. As Kanemasa was originally the village's representative in the government, there really isn't any change at all."

"Ultimately, the Kou's make-up has been persistently maintained, hasn't it."

"Indeed it has. Even now the meetings between the three highest in the village are unofficial. Mostly a formality, in practice, Muroi and Ozaki hardly say no in regards to the district chief's decisions, so it's really more of a consultation. The villager's matters are settled by their representative, and the temple and Ozaki take part in that from above. As such a system is still in place, in a way it draws a line marking the temple and Ozaki as special, and the Kanemasas, too, have a line drawn between themselves and ordinary villagers. So while they're at the heart of the village, it can be said they're not a part of the village."

"Heeh."

"As for us--that is, the inhabitants from Sotoba's former days, this isn't a matter of rationale; it's best understood as instinct, like a sensation on the skin. It's the unconditional imprinting etched into the village, cultivated through history from when the village was first erected. That the three pilalrs are special, are elite, so to speak. That said, the people who entered the village afterwards don't have that sensation. Not only do they not know the history, they probably can't understand what makes the big three so high and mighty as they are. Especially if they aren't families of the temple parish, then they have no frame of reference for the temple. So, the temple being so high and mighty must seem ill founded. The village has a strong sense of unity, which comes with the instinct to distinguish one's own from others'. The one that's the most removed on its summit, so towards the temple a certain antipathy is born."

"I see...."

Hasegawa forced a smile. "But that's rather strange, isn't it? Speaking of those new residents, it's the new people who who have

the strictest view on outsiders. Of course there are exceptions in both camps but, in general it's the older houses who are more gregarious towards outsiders. There's differentiation, but without distinct discrimination. The new folks are more frank about it."

Heeh, Yuuki blinked. Katou quietly added in.

"Like an organism, isn't it?"

That simple statement, Yuuki felt, well summed up his thoughts towards the village.

"It is. ...It really is."

The village itself was an existence like a single organic life form. It came about through a complex process, with various systems writhing within its boundaries. It cycled through changes while splitting off multiplying portions of itself, voracious and regenerating, for the maintenance of the whole being. ---Like a living animal.

Yuuki wondered, incidentally, whether this was a good thing. Not even a year ago, when he was here in Sotoba, they were partitioned out as outsiders, with vexated thoughts towards them. And still he did not regret moving here to Sotoba; yet, becoming more intimate with the village as he finally was now, he felt as this were his first time feeling the suspicious nature borne of the village's society.

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6

Spreading out a fresh sheet of Japanese writing paper over the desk, Seishin hunched his upper body forward slightly over it. The chair that had been used since his grandfather's time let out a creak like a sigh into the still of the night. With a spaced out stare up to the aging grains of wood on the ceiling, his vacant attentions lingered on the past, cornered by a single word.

---What the hell happened?

(Nothing...)

---Mind if I ask why?

(There wasn't any reason or anything.)

He played with his pencil in his hand as he thought.

The hard lead was sharpened to a fine tip like the point of a sword.

When he had first started writing novels, for some reason or another he had it in his mind that he should write in pen, so he made use of a fountain pen that he never did get used to. That summer, fearing the way the ink smeared, he switched to pencil. His dorm room was so hot that the air trapped between the Japanese writing paper and his left hand warped under the heat.. Just leaning forward caused the sweat to pour endlessly, the ink becoming brown and blue halos.

The reason he had used slim, hard leaded pencils for each short

story was because it no matter what the grit of the pencil would end up littering the paper. He tried a different hardness of the lead, a different maker, and about the time he had found his present model, an upperclassman who had graduated had come by the dorms to hang out. Tsuchihara who had entered the publishing industry took Seishin's manuscript with him, then returned with orders for him to rewrite it. How many times did he fix it, as told? After some count of times, Tsuchihara took the manuscript with him and, that night, there was a phone call. We're printing it, he was told, and he remembered not having any idea what he was talking about.

---Weren't you writing looking to go pro?

Remembering that conversation, even now a wry smile leaked out. It wasn't as if he'd by any means particularly thought about becoming an author.

---Then, why did you fix every little thing every time I told you to!

Because he was told it would be better to fix it; and the next time Tsuchihara came by he would ask "Did you fix it?" and so for no other reason he showed it to him.

---You are a real piece of work.

Tsuchihara's voice overlapped with the dorm adviser Muramatsu's.

---It's you we're talking about, how can you not know?

(Even now I still don't.)

As if mesmerized, Seishin stared at his left hand atop the writing paper. The cheap, boorish model of wristwatch. The reason he had started wearing it was, of course, to cover the scar that was there. Now there was nothing more to see of that scar than a white line but still, if he took off his wristwatch, he himself was suddenly taken aback by what a scar it was.

---There's no way you were drunk, is there? I heard you basically never drank.

(Indeed, I have no memory of drinking.)

---If it's hard to say, a letter or anything will be fine.

The first composition he wrote, intending to sound out his own heart, somewhere along the line became chaos, skipping from point to point, repeating itself. When he'd turned it in to Muramatsu, he appeared to be deeply, sincerely annoyed.

---I don't have any idea what you're trying to say. Isn't this a novel?

Looking at it again having been told that, it did indeed resemble a novel. The next time, he wrote from the beginning with the intent to write a novel. For Seishin who didn't particularly have anything like a hobby, it became the closest thing he had to one.

Why. Why, this of all things?
Why would you consent to sin thusly?

Why, he was asked by so many people, but Seishin couldn't answer. To tell the truth, it was because he didn't know the reason, himself. If truly pressed to say something, it was just that he wanted to try it. That was it. In his second year of college, at the end of the year party, he thought. Suddenly, he just felt like it. Vaguely, he knew that it wasn't enough to die from but, dying or not dying wasn't that important at the time, he thought now. He left the drinking party early, returning to the dormitory bathroom. It was the season of end-of-the-year parties, and the season for going home, so the community bathroom was unmanned. There, indifferent, he cut into himself.

In truth, no matter how he thought about it, Seishin couldn't think of anything that had happened for him to wish death on himself. He wasn't particularly unhappy, nor did he by any means have any particular self loathing. Because he knew that a person would not die from cutting their wrists, it was unlikely that he really wanted to die. Seishin had a feeling that at that time for himself the meaning was not in the result but in doing the act itself. It was not that he wanted to die, he didn't think it was anything

other than wanting to try dying, but the origin of that impulse was one he didn't understand well even now.

Beneath the wristwatch, while hidden the scar was still evident. Everyone in the village knew about it. That was why they pretended not to see, and before Seishin knew it he was used to it. Just when, he thought, did it feel like something that people couldn't see?

(....It was not jealousy.)

Seishin gripped his pencil.

He was still possessed by something. The sudden murderous intent took him unexpectedly.

(No) Seishin murmured. He had just wanted to try it. With no murderous intent, he killed his little brother. (.... It's better this way.)

The hallway confined within grey stone was empty, dusk and dawn alike basking in its widths. The dark, dull grey pile up had no decoration aside from a glass window very high up in one corner, light shining down through it diagonally.

The light, donning a melancholy hue, glistened on the white linen cloth. Spread out above the cold stone paving, the reason for the rises and falls drawn by the white sheet was that beneath it were laid out his little brother's remains.

He and the sage, with his little brother's remains interposed betwixt them, had a confrontation. And yet even so, he could not pry his eyes from the dull light of the linen cloth, and because of that very light shining down, he, in the dimmer still light, had the sensation of a singularly abandoned orphan.

---Why would thou commit such a sin?

The sage had been asking him such through dusk. And yet even so, he could not answer. If you wish to know why it was because him himself did not know the reason that he had killed his little brother. He was the one who wanted to ask why.

His single blood relative, gentle and with a profound kindness, like

an incarnation of splendor itself was his brethern. He did, in reality, love his brother, and liked living together with his little brother. As to why he had to kill his little brother, he had no sort of reason at all. Yet nevertheless, he took up arms against his brother.

It was an impulse of an attack. Surely, there was no murderous intent towards his brother. Yet raising a weapon against his brother certainly did bring about his brother's death as a result.

That little brother became a Shiki and trailed him across the wasteland. His futile stare seemed always to be asking, always, why? Had he a clear reason for murderous intent, if he'd had any grounds on which to criticize his brother, or had it been self defense, he would have to please forgiveness and yet, he had none of them and he could not. He could do not but hate that fleeting impulse, not but grieve that its result was his little brother's death.

----That wasn't its intention.

I definitely never hated you.

It wasn't like I'd wanted you to die. There wasn't anything I wanted to get revenge for or make you realize.

Forgive me, into the dawn he moaned, taking to his knees upon the cold wastelands. His brother's answer, of course, did not come.

Seeking a gust of wind into which he could fathom an auditory hallucination, he at last fell to sleep.

sinnesspiel

Links to Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Translation Notes

Bon

notes from chapter 1 expanded upon with information relevant to Chapter 7

[here](#)

: These include the

cucumber horse and **eggplant cow**,

a Bon tradition.

Chapter 7 - 2

Marriage Interviews

(O)miai

, usually translated as arranged marriages, are more like meetings and dates with the explicit intent of marriage. Typical ages for these meetings are 23-30, and are often set up by parents who feel the adult child is not seeking enough initiative to wed on their own. Marriage Interviews can be set up by family, friends, or by the person themselves, either formally with a company or otherwise. In the more formal ones, the families meet and compare their compatibility. Looks, education, employment, pedigree, social status, etc. are all considered, usually before the first actual meeting between the two to be wed. After the decision is reached based on the statistics on paper, and the first in person meeting, there are usually three to five dates had before determining whether to wed or not. The initial vetting process is ideally strict enough to avoid

the potential embarrassment of an embarrassingly personal refusal at such a late stage.

They are declining in popularity as ideas of a more natural romance and courtship have become more popular. In a closed region such as Sotoba where new prospects are understandably harder to come by, the appeal is obvious. This is how Junko and other women who married out of the town into Sotoba most likely met up with their husbands, if they did not meet in college such as Kyouko and Toshio. The woman typically moves in with the man rather than the reverse, so Sotoba women who have interviews would generally leave the village upon deciding to wed.

Chapter 7 - 3

Cucumber horses and eggplant cows.

A Bon tradition. In some regions, they are both put out, facing the house, for the spirits to ride in on. In others, the horse is put out during

Mukae-bon

for a fast return home and the cow during

Okuri-bon

for a slow return to the afterlife. The opposite also occurs, to express fear/respect of a lingering spirit.

Example

image from Musashi Restaurant.

Chapter 7 - 4

*"I'm sure there'd be a mother-n-law like **Rottenmeier-san**."* -

A reference to Johanna Spyri's work,

Heidi

. Miss Rottenmeier is strict and decidedly not fun nanny figure within the story.

Heidi

was made into a very successful, popular anime series in the 70s and is very well known amongst Japanese adults (or at least, people who were adults in the 90s such as in Shiki; people currently in their 20s, perhaps not so much).

Chapter 7 - 5

Kou

Japanese RoSCAs, historically run by communities since before Japan was strongly united under a single government or wide scale banking. Set up by communities for themselves, all members bring a fixed amount of money to the pot and then who gets to take out how much at each meeting is decided, by a representative, by putting in more money/bidding, or by lottery. Those who received continue to pay into the pot at future meetings, with an interest-adjusted rate to assure those who had their share of the pot later have not put in more than they receive when their turn arrives. The people continue to come to meetings until everybody has had a share. Once all people have had a share, the unit may be dissolved. At times small local governments would form organizations of this nature in order to fund welfare programs, such as during poor harvests, by delegating it to the neediest portion quickly. Because such arrangements were largely regional, the likelihood of failing to meet one's obligation or leaving early was low. As they were frequently community endeavors, at times who received first could be determined based on need or by a representative with little risk, as involvement was voluntary.

Three Pillars -

a continuation of the

[Murakata](#)

matter.

The situation described between the temple, Kanemasa, and the Ozaki house is a reflection of the common style of governance of villages during the Edo period. Called the Murakata Sanyaku, or the three roles of the Murakata, it consisted of the following roles: The village headman, the village elder (also occasionally called the group leader) and the people's representative. How each position was assigned varied from votes to appointment by outside sources, throughout history and territories. In summary, the three were involved in civil administration of the village.

The village headman was generally responsible for the overall delegation and governing of the village. the elder assisted, and the people's representative was an auditor. This was the general rule and not an absolute, as things varied region to region.

sinnesspiel

1

On the morning of the fifteenth, Toshio was roused from sleep by a single telephone ringnig. Rubbing at his sleepy eyes, he reluctantly picked up the receive, which let out a dismayed woman's voice. What was being shouted, what it was saying, he couldn't really tell.

"I don't know who this is but, could I get you to calm down for me?" Toshio bit back a yawm. Good grief, he realized. It was finally Bon, a day off, and he thought he'd be freed from early morning examinations. "---Calm down. I'm going to ask you some questions, try to answer them for me. Who are you?"

This is Shimizu, said a voice at its wits end. It was a half crying scream raised out in accusation.

"Shimizu---" Toshio suddenly felt himself waking up quickly. "Shimizu-san's wife? Did something happen with Megumi-chan?"

The woman broke down crying into the phone. From the bitter voice, he could only pick up bits and parts of words. Megumi, breathing, dead, even shaking her.

"I'm coming now, within fifteen minutes. Is that all right?"

He said firmly, hanging up the phone without waiting for an answer. He didn't know the gist of things but what did did know was that Megumi's condition had taken a sudden turn.

Rushing out of the room without a moment's delay, he received a suspicious look from Takae and Kyouko who poked their faces out.

"What is this ruckus?"

"Her condition took a sharp turn. Shimizu-san's place's Megumi-chan."

Dear, said Takae, at a loss for words. Kyouko looked most unamused as she let out a yawn.

"I'm going."

Takae arched a brow as she watched Toshio half-jog down the hall to the bathroom, stripping off his night clothes. Hurried noises came from within the bathroom. Kyouko yawned again, going up the steps. Takae called up after her.

"At least put together something to wear, won't you?"

Kyouko's legs, bare from the camisole down, stopped on the steps. She looked down at Takae from halfway up the staircase.

"You needn't worry."

Feeling something mocking in those words, Takae looked up at Kyouko with sharp eyes. Even if she said that, there had never been a time in her life when she'd went out dressed decently, this girl!

"An emergency case could come blustering in, so if you don't at least make yourself presentable to whoever may come flying in, it will be troubling. It may be hot, but that is---"

Takae's words were cut down flatly.

"It doesn't trouble me at all," she said, putting one hand on her hip, the other on the banister. She made a performance of crossing her shapely, white legs. Takae could feel the blood rushing to her face.

"Now that is simply

not funny!"

"Whoever does come flying in will at least know that they're paying a sudden visit while we're asleep in bed, so they'll just have to overlook such things."

"Kyouko-san----"

Toshio nudged past Takae as she had started to speak.

"Mom, move, please."

Kyouko revealed a hint of a smile, at which Takae could feel herself blushing hotly. Without seeming to realize the situation between the two, Toshio hurried up the steps. Kyouko called after him.

"Nee, I'm really

sleepy..."

Toshio's tone was unambiguous. "Don't worry about it. Go to bed."

Kyouko looked triumphantly down at Takae, stretching ostentatiously as she climbed the stairs. Takae was for the moment too overwhelmed with emotion to do anything but stand there.

Not even sparing the time to shave, Toshio came rushing to the Shimizu house just over ten minutes after having hung up the phone. He got out of the car with his medical bag and hurried to the entryway, the door opened as it they were inside waiting. Still in her nightwear, Hiroko clung to Toshio as if she were drowning.

"Megumi is---

Megumi!"

Nodding and giving a pat to the sobbing Hiroko's shoulder, he let himself in and up to the second story in a hurry. The door with the stuffed animal hanging off of it was left open, Shimizu seen standing there dumbfounded.

"Shimizu-san." Shimizu turned to face Toshio who had called out to him. The color of his face changed quickly. In an instant, realizing the rage openly on his face and ashamed of it, he turned away. When Toshio entered the room Shimizu's own father Tokurou sat in the shadow of the doorway covering his face. Toshio quietly

took in a deep breath.

---It's possible that it's the worst possible scenario.

Having stepped into the room and turned his eyes towards the bed, he determined it would be hard to draw any other conclusion. The girl laid out in the bed's facial muscles were slack, her features having visibly changed. It meant she was dead. And furthermore, that it wasn't something that had just happened moments ago.

Hearing Hiroko call for Megumi as she came up the stairs, Toshio sat his bag down at her bedside. For the time being he took ahold of the hand laying atop the summer towel like blanket. Indeed it was cool, and the softness of the living was clearly lost to it now.

He quietly sought a pulse. He couldn't feel one at all. Even feeling at her neck, there was nothing. Beneath her lightly closed eyelids, her pupils were dilated. He opened his bag and took out his stethoscope, sliding it softly just beneath the neckline of her clothing but, it was completely silent. Her breath and her heart rate were both completely ceased. Letting out a breath, Toshio removed the stethoscope.

"----I knew it, she's dead, isn't she?"

The voice of Shimizu lingering behind him sounded as if it were being murmured through grit teeth.

"She is dead."

No, Hiroko voiced. "I mean, Doctor, didn't you say that Megumi had anemia? Would plain anemia be, would it---"

"Won't you stop it?" Shimizu said in an angry, low voice. "This isn't the Junior Doctor's fault. You take grandpa and look after him."

"But..."

"Go."

Toshio turned around just as Hiroko was putting a hand on

Tokurou's arm, sobbing. Tokurou covered his face as he pulled her along out of the room. While being taken out of the room as if being practically carried, Hiroko cast a glare filled with resentment towards Toshio.

Toshio let out a deep breath.

"I don't know what you'll think of me saying this but, my condolences."

"Why did Megumi die?"

"That's something we won't know unless we examine her," Toshio said as he turned his eyes towards Megumi's bed. Her night closed were undisturbed, and her bedding wasn't in disarray. Her limbs were splayed in a calm position, so at least there was no mistake that Megumi hadn't suffered.

"Do people die from simple anemia?"

Shimizu was trying with all his might to suppress the blame in his voice, but he wasn't very successful.

"In cases where the anemia is a symptom of some other deficiency or defect, it is possible."

"Some other deficiency or---"

Remaining seated, Toshio turned and looked up at the bristling Shimizu.

"Anemia is the name of a symptom, not the name of a sickness. There are times when anemia just happens but, there are times when something malfunctions in the body, and anemia occurs because of that. Normally, in those cases, there are signs that that's the case, though."

"Are you saying that's what happened to Megumi?"

"I don't know. At this point I can't say anything without an analysis. At the very least, if we had the results of the blood sample I'd taken the other day, I might know something but unfortunately

the results haven't come back yet. It's right over the Bon holiday."

"Bon Holiday...." At Shimizu's groaning voice, Toshio let out a breath.

"I hate mincing words. Moreover because I do know you, Shimizu-san, I don't want to sugar coat it. The other day, when I visited, I'd taken a sample of Megumi-chan's blood. I sent that for analysis. The results haven't come in yet. It's because the lab is closed for Bon. Of course, it wasn't as if there were no ways I could have had it sooner, and it wasn't as if I couldn't have done the most basic level analysis myself. But all the same, I didn't think that there was a need to hurry, at least not at that point."

"Anemia can be caused by something wrong in the body. Even knowing there was that possibility?"

"I'll acknowledge that it's a possibility but in Megumi-chan's case, I couldn't think that was the case. ---I couldn't think of it as anything but ordinary anemia. Because I knew there was a possibility that wasn't the case, I sent the sample out for the lab. But, I didn't think there was a need to hurry the results. It was because Megumi-chan's condition wasn't severe enough that I'd thought to hurry it. If there was a severe enough defect, there would definitely have been symptoms, and I mean ones other than anemia. If there had been other symptoms that resembled a serious illness, I wouldn't have even hurried the test results, I'd have called for an ambulance and had her taken to the National Hospital. But, it wasn't like that. It looked like simple anemia, and even if it wasn't simple anemia, it looked like there was time to look at the test results, to re-examine her, and to find the exact cause."

"Then, why did Megumi die?"

"Even to me her death is a fluke. If I tried to predict the cause of death here and now, I'd have to say it was simple anemia, which I can't say. ---The truth is, I'm the one who's the most shocked."

When he had examined her the other day, indeed he hadn't really seen any particular symptoms beyond anemia. Nor did she have any particular medical history of such. Megumi was the type of girl who

would make a fuss over the most trivial symptoms, and furthermore had a tendency to fake sick. She'd say this or that was hurting but no matter how many times she came for examination, no actual cause was found. ---Or, did that become a forgone conclusion?

Toshio had been wondering to himself when analyzing Megumi's body. Was there the possibility that he already decided for himself, and because of that, overlooked signs of something more serious?

(I can't say there's not...)

Reluctant as he was, he couldn't not acknowledge that. In truth, when Toshio had come to do the examination, he was surprised to see that Megumi even had anemia. After the fuss over her disappearance, when he'd heard that Megumi didn't seem well, Toshio's first thought was that she was faking sick. When thinking about what an incident it had become, Megumi, who had caused the fuss, it was indeed true that he'd thought she was faking feeling bad out of fear of being scolded by the Shimizus.

Looking at Megumi from the outside, there weren't any injuries or anything out of place. Her body temperature had dropped, and rigor mortis was setting in. There was some light postmortem lividity, and her corneas were beginning to go opaque. But, there was no doubt that she was dead, and furthermore that a few hours had passed since she had died.

"Late at night---or, more precise, this morning, I think. From one to three in the morning." Toshio murmured, turning back to Shimizu. "What should we do?"

"What---do you mean?"

"I don't know the precise cause of death. And it's been over twenty four hours since I'd last examined her. If I may, I'd like to recommend a medical autopsy. At the least, I'd like to take a blood sample and perform a bone marrow aspiration, but I need Shimizu-san's permission."

"That's not funny!" Shimizu's face went crimson as he shouted, and then, surprised by the anger in his own voice, he lowered his

face. "---No, I'm sorry."

"You want to hit me, I understand that, Shimizu-san."

"No.... I don't have any excuse. That isn't what I meant. But, an autopsy is no good. She's just a little girl. Even if we knew the cause of death, Megumi won't come back. ...Please, just spare her."

The way he's able to control himself is amazing, Toshio thought. He probably wanted to wring Toshio's neck and shout at him. Knowing Shimizu's personality, if it could explain what happened, he might have agreed to letting him take what he needed. But, he was hesitant to stimulate any emotion which might elicit further shameful behavior from Shimizu.

(Or maybe it's that I want a way out of this.)

Simple anemia, he'd said. To be sure, that was a mistake. And there was the possibility that it wasn't an inevitable mistake, but one based on his preconceived assumptions. Megumi's corpse was irrevocable evidence of that.

"Then, shall we say the time of death is 2:00 AM, and that the cause of death is acute heart failure?"

To Toshio's question, Shimizu nodded.

sinnesspiel

2

"Shimizu, Megumi-chan?"

Seishin stared long and hard at the face of Mitsuo who had just hung up the phone. He had no words to follow up with, but Tsurumi voiced them in his stead.

"That's the daughter, then. ---You don't mean the old man?"

Looking a bit blanked out, Mitsuo nodded. "The daughter, they said. The highschooler," Mitsuo said, breathing a sigh of unclear meaning. "You know, from the mountain hunt before Bon. When they said the Shimizu's daughter didn't come home. Ever since she was found from that, it sounds like she'd been bedridden. And then this morning, it was all too sudden."

"She died?" Ikebe asked, just to confirm.

"Another one?"

Ikebe's spoke as a proxy the sentiments of those gathered in the temple office. Gotouda Shuuji's death came right after the three in Yamairi had died, and now even a young girl. With the three in Yamairi getting on in years, the only thing inconceivable about their ends were the circumstances. Shuuji was young, yes, but even if sudden death wasn't common for men Shuuji's age, it wasn't something rare either. ---But, Megumi was too young. She wasn't even yet an adult.

"Good grief...." Tsurumi breathed, sitting down into a chair. "Shimizu-san's family must be in shock. It will be hard for them to meet the griever. They'll be highschool students, after all."

"I feel sorry for her, herself. She was just getting to the best season of her life, yeah?"

Yes, it was Ikebe who said something unusually mature.

"You said it. What is going on this summer, I wonder?"

Seishin nodded to Tsurumi's words. Turning his eye to the window, the vapor of the heat was flowing in with the sun light. Really, what was going on this summer? ---This intensely hot summer.

Megumi died, Kaori murmured. Even saying it out loud, it didn't feel any more real at all.

Megumi died. She had been told this. But, if she took Love out for a walk, couldn't she still run into her at the bottom of the slope? And when the new school semester started, every morning she'd meet with her.

(I can't see her anymore.)

She knew that logically but Kaori couldn't believe the lack of Megumi. She wouldn't ever see her again or have a conversation with her again. Why would something like that ever have to happen? Girls Kaori's age had misfortunes and died. But, those cases were somethings that happened in the news or in gossip, something that was printed in the papers, something that shouldn't have ever been there at Kaori's side. Right, such a thing would happen to manga or drama characters, but it wasn't a fate that should have ever come to visit Kaori.

Urged by her mother to get ready before going out, she went through the motions in a daze. She knew that something big had happened. And that it was something related to Megumi, she knew, too. Put in concrete terms, it was "Megumi's death" that happened to her, but still, after all, that hadn't quite hit her in the gut yet.

She had the strange rising sensation that she needed to hurry. Like she had some kind of event she had to take part in. And yet, when she looked at her mother taking out her flower print apron

and putting it into her bag, something in her chest felt hazy, distraught. ---As if thinking it weird that she'd need to take out a flower print apron like that.

And all the same, what was weird was Kaori herself. Of course her mother was going to help with the service at Megumi's house. Because she was close with Megumi's mother. She had to go to work with the women of the Mourning Crew. It was all too natural that she would need an apron for that.

As her mother told her, she walked the street she had become used to walking in her house clothes. A heat haze was already rising off of the asphalt. Two days ago she was walking the street just like this. Now, what was different from two days ago was that she was bearing Juzu prayer beads.

The entryway to Megumi's house was left open. Countless people were coming and going. Kaori likewise in her everyday clothes, and her mother with her worn out handbag, stepped onto the hard packed floor of the entryway and lowered their heads to Megumi's mother.

O n t h i s s a d o c c a s s i o n , w e g r i e v e w i t h y o u . M y c o n d o l e n c e s .

In a daze listening to that mysterious incantation, prompted by her mother, Kaori lowered her head as usual. Shimizu Horoko said to please go to see Megumi. Of course, Kaori had intended to. When she turned towards the stairway to the second story, her mother called to stop her. Hiroko and Kaori's mother turned her towards the first story tatami room where, for some reason or other, Megumi was laid out. Having the family altar so close to her was bad luck, Kaori found herself thinking.

(I'm strange...)

Kaori knelt down beside Megumi's futon.

(Megumi is strange, too...)

Why, when it was this hot, was she so wrapped up and covered in

her futon? In the first place, this wasn't Megumi's room. If she went back to her room, she had a bed. And furthermore, this Megumi was like nothing but a shell of her.

(Where did Megumi go to, I wonder?)

As Kaori thought this, her mother and Hiroko were talking about something while crying, and she gazed at Megumi's husk. The Juzu beads she gripped were a strange sensation in her hands.

As she thought as much, her mother urged her on again. You can go on home now, she was told, to which she nodded her head. She didn't understand what she had come here for. So, alone, she turned towards the entry way before suddenly realizing she was facing the second story stairway. There was nobody in Megumi's room.

The room was very well cleaned. The bed was made, too. Kaori looked around the room. The shelves and the top of her desk were both well organized. Her textbooks, notebooks, stationary still in the packaging. In surveying this, Kaori thought of the meaning of Megumi being in the tatami room rather than this one.

(.....Megumi.)

Something rose up in her throat. Yet, no matter what, it wouldn't rise further. Nor could she swallow it back down past it; it was painful.

Kaori ended up idly looking beneath the desk mat. The transparent deskmat was atop a calendar depicting kittens. And beneath that. That was Megumi's secret place. Memos or letters and the like she didn't want her parents to see were tucked in there.

Beneath the calendar she found a postcard. It was a postcard with a cute penguin picture.

A formal greeting in the heat of summer.

The formally written letters each had a thin blue border to them. With a glaze drawn here and there, they gave off the feeling of

letters coated in ice. Below that was also a neatly written personal message. She had the feeling it had been rewritten several times.

**It really is too hot out isn't it!
When school starts, it's really going to be a pain...
Anyway, please be safe in the heat!**

Looking at the other side, Kaori smiled. At the same time, tears overflowed.

Yuuki Natsuno-sama

(Oh, Megumi...)

**(Even though I meant for this to be a midsummer greeting,
after writing it over and over,
it's now the season for a late summer greeting card.
Am I an dummy or what?)**

"Oh, Megumi... You really are a dummy....."

Once again Kaori turned the post card over. There was the cleanly written letters and the small colorful marker drawings.

"Working so hard to write this... if you don't send it, there's no meaning, you know..."

Over and over she rewrote it. To make it look as pretty as it could. Her overflowing tears fell above the postcard. Hurriedly, Kaori wiped it with the edge of her T-shirt. The marker smeared just a little.

"---Megumi."

There was no doubt she'd thought about the post card since summer break started. She went about to various stationary stores, looking for the postcard she liked most, then wasting how many of them? What to write, she fretted, as the days past. When she'd finally written it, she couldn't rouse the courage to send it and it turned to late summer, and she had to write it again. ---In the end, it still went unsent.

"Even though if you'd told me, I'd have sent it for you..."

While wavering about sending it, her health grew worse and she

really couldn't send it. And then, at last----

Kaori quietly returned her postcard to where it was hidden. She put the desk mat back in place, then collapsed into tears. At last, the hot, thick lump in her throat broke.

"This can't be..."

When Hirosawa opened the door to creole with Yuuki, Hasegawa gave a cough as if beckoning them over. It was early afternoon, the day of Bon. There were no signs of customers. Only Tashiro was seated at the counter.

"Good afternoon. Business is slow, I see."

Hearing Hirosawa's words, Hasegawa leaned forward. "Hasegawa-san, there was a death. At Shimizu-san's place."

Eh, Hirosawa blinked, as if being presented with something dubious.

"A death, who?"

"Megumi-chan. In the middle of the night. Ever since that, she'd been bedridden, it seems. That took a sudden turn, and by morning, she was already..."

"That can't be..." Hirosawa murmured. 'Since that' must have meant when Megumi went missing. To be honest, when they found her, Megumi's condition had been strange. "Just what in the world..."

"It sounds like even the Junior Doctor really doesn't know. Just that, since it was very sudden, it might have been a sickness with some relation to leukemia, he said. --Or rather, the young madame of the hospital had come by, and she had said that. She came back for Obon. She said the Junior Doctor had said that.

I see, said Hirosawa taking a seat at the counter. "That's, Shimizu-san must be heart broken. ...I'm at a loss."

Hasegawa nodded, indeed, as he put the siphon into the flame.

"Come to think of it, doesn't the boy from Yuuki-san's house go to the same school as Megumi-chan?"

Yes, Yuuki nodded. "It seems like they're in the same class."

First year high school students. Natsuno had yet to turn sixteen but he wasn't sure about Megumi. Either way, it was far too young.

"It's terrible, isn't it," Hasegawa said again shaking his head. "The unpleasanties continue."

Really, Hirosawa and Tashiro agreed.

"What is going on this year. So little rain, and the days continue on insufferably hot..."

Hirosawa nodded and looked to Yuuki.

"Yuuki-san, what will you do about the service?"

"Ah---that's right. Even though I haven't known Shimizu-san long, I can't say we're complete strangers."

"I don't think it is something that you need to force, though. I have a connection to Shimizu-san, having been Megumi-chan's homeroom teacher during middle school, so I will be going, myself."

"No, I'll also be going. My son is her classmate, after all. There was also the incidents from before. ---But, I don't know what to say to comfort him."

"What?" Hirosawa said, preparing the coffee as he spoke. "At times like these, people are just happy that there are people who are thinking about them."

In front of Takemura, in the languid air of the early afternoon, the usual old people gathered about.

"Dead, you say? Who is?" Oitarou and Takeko asked, Ohtsuka Yaeko answering.

"Shimizu's daughter! Tokurou-san's place's Megumi-chan."

Ah, nodded Hirosawa Takeko. "The little show-off, that one?"

"That's right," Yaeko said, her voice low. "Didn't that girl go missing before Bon?"

Oitarou nodded several times. "Right, right, on the eleventh. I saw a big bunch of lights in the western mountains, I did; wondered what happened and wouldn't you know the next day when I asked they said there was a mountain hunt."

"Yes!" Ohkawa Liquor Shop's Namie's voice added in. "Even by nightfall she hadn't come back. And that turned into a big fuss. My Tomio's a member of the fire brigade, so he was recruited for the mountain hunt. In the end she was found unconscious in the western mountains."

Yaeko gave an exaggerated not. "Since then I hear she's been in bad shape. That last night, while her parents were sleeping, she died!"

"Well dear me."

As Tatsu was half way listening, she realized it had happened again. A girl died at night. As for the night of the mountain combings, Tatsu didn't know about it until it was all finished. On the day of the welcoming fires, the new move-ins had appeared here and there giving their greetings to the village they said but Tatsu didn't even see that.

(Everything's happening at night now, isn't it.)

It was always during a time when things wouldn't reach Tatsu's

eyes.

"That's why I told you, didn't I?" From far back on the seat, Ikumi wore a meaningful smile. "That nothing good would come of this summer. As expected, people are dying. I told you so."

"Died? Who?" Yano Kanami's hand stopped with surprise, looking at the face of her mother who had come rushing into the shop.

"Like I said, Tokurou-san's place's grand daughter. At the Shimizu place."

"Shimizu...." Kanami tilted her head, then cried out. "You can't mean Megumi-chan from Hiroko-san's place?"

Letting her voice grow loud without thinking, Kanami quickly looked to Motoko washing the dishes at her side. She saw right away how Motoko's pallor had changed.

"Right, right, Megumi-chan!"

"Why did another one...?" Kanami asked the nodding Tae. Please, I'm begging you, don't let it have been a traffic accident, she prayed, ever aware of Motoko's presence at her side.

"I wonder? Before Bon she had gone missing and there was a mountain hunt for her, do you suppose she was injured? Aa... No, I have the feeling I heard somewhere she was sick, come to think of it."

"Which was it?"

"She was sick, yes. Yaeko-san said that she was bedridden."

"Oh.... the poor thing," Kanami said, though still feeling just a hint of relief. She heard Motoko give out the same small sigh.

"What'll you do?" Tae asked, leading Kanami to nod.

"I'll go to pay my respects. I'm in a bind, though, what can I say to comfort Hiroko-san, I wonder?"

sinnesspiel

3

As sunset neared the evil spirits again grew boisterous. They who came to the side of he who continued to walk and wander the wastelands hurled abuses and stones alike. Even as one who wandered these lands, a sinner indeed was he, one who had broken the commandments.

---Outcast.

The spirits of the dead scorned him and threw stones.

Indeed, he had been cast out from his hometown on the hill. But, the evil spirits who drifted the wasteland thusly too should have been cursed existences like himself, should have been those created by God, driven out of his order.

Aren't you all outcasts, too!

At his angry voice the evil spirits cackled.

We are not outcasts.

We are not murderers.

Those in this land are without sin, without judgment.

It is that within your heart, the lingering sentiments, the firmly rooted delusions, the hatred, that uncouthly fastens you to your relations.

He was silenced.

He lost his hometown, he had lost the divine protection of God, and he had lost his little brother. The triple penance was without a doubt the reward for the sin he himself had committed.

---Thou art cursed.

Even without receiving the hex of the evil spirits, he was already cursed. Come the night, this curse took the form of his little brother to pay him a visit. Just being there at his side, without laying blame on him, or rather the grotesque figure making no move to injure him at all, serving as neither reprimand nor punishment, could not be called anything other than a curse.

That the little brother called upon him in this wasteland may have been the will of his little brother himself, or it may have been the will of God. If by chance it were the little brother's own will, what, then, was his motive? Revenge, denunciation, blame; any action that would support any conjecture he could make went undone by this Shiki. Vacant eyes only stared intently at him, following him without a word. Perhaps there was meaning in asking the Shiki his intent but as he could not be sure of that, if there was any intent at all, what it was he could not begin to imagine.

Seishin threw down his pencil.

He was making steady progress down the squares of the paper but he didn't feel that he wanted to write any of what he should have writ. It felt like piling up building blocks without meaning. What was written over every square was the character for "emptiness" it felt.

No, Seishin thought. What was burying everything might have been the character for "falsehood."

This was not a curse driven by affection.

--But, however much "his" little brother was an avatar of love, could he really go without hating the sinner who slaughtered him?

He killed his little brother on impulse. To his little brother, the older brother's violence should have been impossible to predict. Their betrayal was sudden, an irrational occurrence. And yet all the more if the little brother felt sympathy for him there could be no doubt that his little brother bore a religious fanaticism to that called love.

(No, that's not it.)

Of course his little brother had a specific meaning in that he was nothing more than a symbol. To start with, for Seishin there was never any reason to write people according to reality in a hypothetical, made-up story. If there were a comparison to reality, in reality people didn't have meanings.

Even while he consented to acknowledging as much, the uncomfortable feeling towards that figure, separated from reality, was caused by none other than the unrest that troubled Seishin over Shimizu Megumi's untimely death.

---Of course, people die. There was no escaping that. If a newborn infant could die, then young girls could die as well. To begin with the idea that a human lifespan should continue past that was nothing more than an illusion concluded on by wishful thinking. Life and death were two sides of the same object. It was unmistakably the same thing to say that something was alive as it was to say that something might die.

Regardless, Megumi's death was thought of as tragic. She had enough years to her age to have qualified as having lived life and yet, he couldn't escape the impression that that it was an injustice, that she was being deprived by something. The possibilities her life could have had, the future she had drawn out in her mind, the bitterness and sweetness she was to have met in reality. That those were her right taken away by death most unjust was a feeling he couldn't cast aside.

Death was an unfair phenomenon. ---If so, the death thrust upon "his" little brother should too have been unfair. All the more for it being an act of murder; it was an irrational, merciless violence beyond the solemnity of death itself. The moment Megumi slipped away into death, was she conscious of it? Was the little brother conscious of it? If conscious of it, what was thought of it?

He was struck by the abrupt feeling he should have known.

He timidly tried to turn his head but all that he could see was a red swirl. Until the residential advisor had come into the closed up bathroom, Seishin watched the water. The transparent water flowed over the white tile surface, a floating red haze within it. An uncertain amount of the viscous red liquid was there, riding through the transparent and non-viscous water in slender cord like shapes, flowing. As it looked as if it would become undone, he watched in a daze as threads nearer and nearer to him dissolved into it. Maybe the reason Seishin hadn't been thinking of anything at that time was because it was something he had chosen himself,

or possibility because he realized that doing this would not cause him to die. --Yes, at the very least, it wasn't unfair. At least, not towards himself.

Of course, according to the people around Seishin, even while evaded, it would have been an unjust phenomenon. He was put in a taxi, spent a night at the hospital and tried to return to the dorms just as his parents had arrived. Like that, he was brought home, Mitsuo and Tsurumi---and even those like Tokujirou whose connections to the temple were deep interviewed him. All of them asked why. All of them seemed as if, more than anything, they had suffered the shock of such an unjust and unreasonable something thrust upon them.

Why, the sage inquired.

Seishin could not answer. That was because he did not have an answer, yet by them, in their own way, Seishin's

Sentiments of the heart were given consideration and allowance, were processed and quietly digested in their hearts. The neighbors no longer asked why. Instead they treated the slaughterer who had snatched away their lovable brethren unjustly with gazes steeped in compassion and sorrow,

Seishin came to his senses and breathed a self-derisive sigh. Through the window came the night air and the sounds of the insects. Seishin folded up the writing paper and put it into the trashcan before leaving the temple office.

The village he overlooked from the grounds was dark. As expected there were no longer any remnants of the lights from the Bon dance. The dead that had returned for a handful of moments, and the living who welcomed them were asleep. ---No, there should have been at least one house that was not asleep. Among the sparse lights he could see, one was the light of a window of that unfortunate household, and within that window, surrounding the young girl's remains, they had one final night to spend with their daughter. The lights lit for the gods and the incense set for her not yet put out was the family's final protection of her.

Thinking of Shimizu and Hiroko's, and surely her grandfather Tokurou's, grief depressed him. It was unreasonable to be laying out the one who was supposed to have laid them out. Thinking such pessimistic, melancholy thoughts he entered the cemetery.

The cemetery, for Seishin, wasn't a strange place. It was where the dead slept but strange as it was he felt it was the same as his patron's own tatami sleeping rooms. Now there was nobody. --- Always, there was nobody. That was the sort of place it was.

Flashlight turned on, he cut across the cemetery walkway to the temple's northwest forest. The steep, chiseled slope faced downwards towards the Yasumori lumberyard but, with the night falling as it had, the slope appeared to run down towards nothing but a dark hole. Along the edge of the slope continued the foot-formed wood cutter's path. Overlooking the lumberyard was a road that detoured towards the western mountains.

He walked while shining a light at his feet. While endeavoring to think about "his" little brother's death, never the less his thoughts always slipped towards Megumi's death in spite of himself. He couldn't not think about all that Megumi had lost. That he couldn't separate himself from it may have been because her cause of death wasn't stated clearly. The day after Megumi's disappearance, she had received an examination by Toshio. Toshio diagnosed her with ordinary amnesia but three days later Megumi was dead. Shimizu Hiroko who told him as much seemed to blame Toshio, an intentional cold indifference hanging in the air when he had come as a condolence caller to the all night vigil.

Of course people made mistakes. He understood that Toshio wasn't almighty, that he made errors. Even if it wasn't a grave medical malpractice error, there were probably no end to the trivial mistakes he had piled up. Even knowing that much, he felt something lingering in his chest. It wasn't as if it was anything he felt towards Toshio. If nothing else, Seishin knew full well that Toshio was as earnest as one could possibly be regarding his own obligations, and on that point he had full faith. ---It was just, if somebody hadn't made some kind of mistake, couldn't Megumi's death have been avoided? Wasn't what lead to her death correctable? Megumi's death was such an irrational turn of events,

wasn't it something that shouldn't have happened? He couldn't escape such misgivings.

He walked on for a while, when suddenly the light fell upon emptiness in front of him. Through the cut of the firs, there was a peek at the starry skies. He had lost his sense of time, but he had walked for about fifteen minutes from the temple. Within the forest of firs, there was a random building. It was a desolate and dilapidated old building.

The mountains in this area were a part of the temple. As all of the firs in this area were former gate markers, they were not cut down. As there was no trimming or maintenance, the surroundings had the distinction of being a pure and natural forest. The small path Seishin had walked went forward on into the western mountains and crossed with the woodland path but as far as people who followed this path now a days, it was probably limited to just Seishin. This area which was a part of the temple was a mountain not to be entered by the villagers. Long ago, there were those who saw it thusly. A member of the Kirishiki family, renting this place from the temple, built up that separated building as his own. And there it remained.

Walking across the grass damp with evening dew, he walked up to the porch. The concrete porch was cracked, with summer grass growing out of those crevices. On the porch were two cylindrical pillars supporting the eaves of the roof but with one of the pillars in decline the roof drew an uneasy, warped curve.

As Seishin neared the porch, shining the flash light forward (at last before him) onto something white (a white, pail doll) and stopped.

"----You."

As she turned to face the flashlight, raising one radiant hand, the girl turned around.

"Muroi-san?"

Seishin thought to call out to Sunako but without knowing what

suffix to append to her name, his words were swallowed down.

"Good evening," the young girl smiled. "Is Muroi-san also taking a stroll?"

"Aa---that's right but, you...."

Perhaps not noticing Seishin's bewilderment, Sunako looked up at the building.

"Is this an abandoned house? I wonder just where I've found myself."

Seishin walked closer towards the porch the girl was standing on.

"This is the temple grounds."

"Oh my, then, perhaps I have entered where I must not?"

"No. That's not really what I meant," Seishin murmured, his eyes somehow or another going towards his left hand. The bland wrist watch dial glowed. "You're taking a stroll at this hour?"

"It's as you see. ---Say, this strange building, what is it?" Sunako half asked while gesturing inside of the door all but rotting off. "It appears to be like a church, but it seems it is not."

Seishin couldn't answer that. He was too profoundly baffled.

"Your flashlight?"

"I came without one. The nights in the country certainly are dark, aren't they."

"Step aside." Seishin set foot on the porch Sunako was on and entered into the building. "I have another prepared, I'll lend it to you."

Oh my, said Sunako from the entrance peeking within. "Is this by chance Muroi-san's hideout? Perhaps this is most intrusive of me?"

"No," Seishin said succinctly, taking up a flash light he had set out

on the bench near the entrance. He pushed the switch to assure it worked and presented it to Sunako. "---Here."

"Thank you," Seishin said, entering the building seeming nervous. Taking the flashlight, she shined it over the inside of the building there. The dust covered, lined up benches, and the long, narrow windows in the walls surrounding them as well as something that appeared to be an altar at the front were illuminated.

"This not---a church?"

"It's a church. A private one."

Seishin sat on a bench. Because Seishin had brushed away the dust countless times, for now the grains of wood could be seen. Above the upper right of the altar the night sky could be seen. One part of the roof had fallen in. Beneath it grew summer grass around a pile of debris, and the inside of the building had the smell of evening dew and was filled with the sounds of insects.

"That's a lie, isn't it? It's not a church, this place."

While shining the light here and there, she sat beside Seishin.

"You'll get dirty."

"I'm fine. --But, there is stained glass."

The long, narrow windows were indeed stained glass, All the same, not a one had anything from the scriptures depicted on them.

"Unsettling images."

To begin with the craftsmanship was crude, and on top of that they were broken here and there but it was clear what was depicted on the stained glass Sunako's light illuminated. Three men. The man in the middle had a katana raised in a samurai fashion, and before him knelt two peasant looking men looking upwards with their hands folded in prayer. Beside them were the depictions of cross sections husks of fallen, removed heads. The heads themselves couldn't be seen.

Seishin clutched at his wristwatch and sighed.

"It is a church. Though it's not a formal one. In the past, there was someone strange in this village. He sectioned off this land for himself and build a church."

"Hmm?" Sunako murmured, shining her light on another stained glass window. "A man covered in flames---Ah, no, this is what they call the dance of the straw coat, isn't it?"

Seishin nodded. "Right. He had for a time left the village, and where he was at he had frequently visited a church but he wasn't a formally baptized believer. He didn't have an interest in God. Likely---"

Sunako finished his words. She turned her head while illuminating a picture of a victim being attacked by a lion.

"He had an interested in martyrs. Yes?"

Seishin smiled. "Mm, I think he did. So, it might be better to call this a shrine to martyrs than a church. For him it was a sanctuary, but that isn't what is called a church."

"What a strange fellow you had here."

Mm, Seishin nodded, shining a light towards the altar. Even if it was called an altar, it was just a platform with a few brass candlesticks set out. What Seishin was turning his light towards was the half crumbled interior of the sanctuary, to the left-hand side of the altar---illuminating what was within the sanctuary. That was a bed framed with the same brass as the candlesticks.

"He lived here?"

"Yes, he really was far removed."

"This wasn't someplace that believers gathered? Not where he carried on a, let's see, new aged religion?"

"I don't think it was like that. ---Though thinking that of him was what drove him out here. But, probably, he had never intended as

much, I don't think. The benches are here as if he'd intended to have believers but it looks like he only thought of them as ordinary shelves. When I first found this place, clothing and every day tools and books were lined up on them, after all."

"Was he not well in the head?"

"That might have been the case. He was Kanemasa's---the one who lived where your house is. But they were called Kanemasa. Takemura was his real name. Kanemasa was a trade name."

"He was an ancestor of little old man Takemura?"

"It's not an old enough story to call him an ancestor. As I said before, this is a temple lot. He came saying that Takemura wanted to rent the land. It seems like it happened after the war. Takemura's son was a strange eccentric character, who he said wanted to separate himself off and live out here, so the story goes. As he was a man with many eccentricities, it seems my grandfather thought that it was surely his family who forced him to live separated."

"Ah," Sunako frowned as if with disdain. "A diplomatic form of house arrest."

"That's right. ---Or would be, but it wasn't like that. It was something he wished for himself. And then he built this. When those of the village saw it, they were surprised. No matter how you look at it from any angle, it's a church. Of course, there was no law against there being a church per-say, but---"

"This village was one overseen by the temple," Sunako smiled. "Was that it?"

Seishin smiled again.

"Right. The villagers were largely temple parishioners and such. This is surely a new branch of Christianity, and he had a mind to start it here, it seems they thought. That's why my grandfather and the villagers at the time were alarmed. At the end of a long push of whether he should return or not, Kanemasa forced him to come back to them. Still, it seems he had been living here for about three

years. After that this place had fallen into ruins like this. That all happened during the war."

"Heeh...."

Seishi looked over Sunako who shined the light about with great interest. This was no hour for a girl of about thirteen to be out walking.

"Do you always go out walking at this time of night?"

Sunako turned back to look at him. She lightly shrugged her thin shoulders, her long hair spilling from her shoulders to her chest.

"It isn't as if I always do. At least, when we were at the prior house, I wasn't able to go out."

"A little girl shouldn't be walking around at night, they said?"

"But, ---I wonder if this is a rude way of putting it? Since we're so far in the country, I don't think there is much reason to worry. Especially if taking a stroll through the mountains."

"It's dangerous in the dark. There are wild dogs as well."

"I'd suffocate always staying in the house."

Seishin remembered what Tatsumi had said.

"You... aren't able to go out in the day time at all?"

"That's right, especially in fine weather. The sunlight is bad for me. If I soak in ultraviolet rays, it will quickly become bad for me. That's why even if I will remain peaceable about not going out to school, if I were also closed in at night, why, I could just fall into hysterics. I'd be more dangerous than a wild dog if I were to fall into hysteria, you know."

Seishin blinked. "You look rather healthy."

"When I am healthy. ---That's, I do have a doctor who oversees

my health at my side, after all. There is a doctor in the home. But, I do sleep a lot. You could say half of my time is spent sleeping."

"I see..."

To a little girl who couldn't walk around in the day time, night might not be a time for sleeping so much as a time for taking in the fresh air. He knew that Sunako could also be seen as precocious. Surely inside of the home she really did pass the time often indulging in books.

Sunako sat there on the bench, her feet poking out from the skirt cuff swinging alternately. That was indeed childish, and when he thought that in spite of that aspect of her, she was braving an incurable disease, he realized his sense of compassion. It was the same compassion he had felt regarding Megumi.

"However, even if it's only half of the time, it's good you're well. Even if it's troublesome."

"It isn't something for Muroi-san to be depressed about."

"That isn't really what I meant. --Today, a young girl in the village died."

"...Dear."

"Though she was a little older than you. It was really sudden, too soon. Yes, this might be an irresponsible thing to say but if she were given another half a year, even bedridden, I think that she'd have wanted to live."

"Muroi-san, were you close to this person?"

"I wasn't particularly close with her, but the family is a part of the parish."

"How strange."

Seishin looked back at Sunako. Sunako tilted her head to the side, looking up at Seishin.

"If you were very close, I would understand why Muroi-san would become depressed. Or is it that how Muroi-san feels towards all of those in his parish?"

"No... I wonder. It's just that she was so young. She was still only in tenth grade."

"You're a romantic, aren't you. Or should I say sentimental?" Sunako said, standing up, brushing the dust from her skirt. "It's as if you think that a young person dying is especially terrible."

Seishin's eyes widened slightly.

"You don't think that it's a terrible thing?"

Sunako turned her head, With a certain determination, she looked at Seishin.

"Death is terrible for anyone. --Didn't you know that?"

Seishin was at a loss for words.

"It isn't related to whether you die young or take on many years and then die. The same for good and bad people. Death is equal. There's no such thing as an especially terrible or a not so terrible death. That is why death is so terrifying."

Death is equal, Seishin murmured.

"Whether young, whether old, regardless of their day to day life style, those things only have meaning while a person is alive. Age or individual personality are too irrelevant, your time will come, and when that happens, everything that defined that person and all that they stood for becomes meaningless, so any death is terrible. Am I wrong?"

Seishin nodded in agreement.

"I must return now. --Would you mind if I were to come here again?"

"I think that's your own choice. The mountain paths are

dangerous at night, so I wouldn't recommend it, though."

"People are only free half of the time as it is, so I'm not of a mind to be stopped by a bit of danger. Do you come here often, Muroi-san?"

"Not enough to call it often, but."

"Oh? Then, next time, I'll bring a book with me. I wonder if you could sign it for me, if we meet again?"

Seishin smiled. "I don't mind."

sinnesspiel

4

"Ah, Doctor." Toshio was coming out of the physiotherapy room past the reception desk when Mutou called to him from behind the counter. "What will you be doing in regards to the funeral for the Shimizus?"

Toshio made a faintly sullen face. "Ah... What time's it start, again?"

"It's eleven," answered Mutou who, like Toshio, had met with Shimizu several times at creole and wasn't distant enough to say he didn't know him.

"You're going then, Mutou-san?"

"I was hoping you would let me. It isn't like I don't know him at all. I passed on the over night vigil but, at least I should attend the service."

"Guess so," Toshio mumbled to himself. Toshio planned to go too. It was just, thinking back on the all night vigil, he became weary. Tokurou's reproachful eyes, Hiroko's implicitly critical manner of speaking, and then Shimizu Takeo's easily seen through manner of self restraint. He got that the Shimizu family blamed him. He didn't think it was unfounded but, still, closing down shop over someone you just didn't not know?

Toshio let out a breath; "Then, let's go in a little bit," he called out to Mutou. As Mutou nodded, the phone rang. Towada in the office picked up the receiver and after answering looked to Toshio.

"It's the Yasumori Sawmill," Towada said covering the receiver. "The Yasumori's Giichi-san seems strange, they say."

"Strange?" Toshio entered the receptionists office and took the receiver. Yasumori Atsuko's voice came through.

"It's Giichi-san? What's the matter?"

Yasumori Giichi of the Yasumori Sawmill had been bedridden for a long time now with the grave illness of Parkinson's Disease. He was in his advanced years and in a condition where something happening at any time wouldn't be strange. "

"He's not showing any signs of consciousness at all. If you talk to him he doesn't answer, his breath is shallow and slow. I think that his complexion has slowly been getting more and more of a dark red, but."

Maybe it was because Atsuko herself had spent many years as a nurse; her voice seemed used to delivering the state of affairs. That for two days he had a slight fever, that since this morning his blood pressure has been terribly low, that when putting an ear to his chest she heard rales, that a few days ago he had to have an aspiration treatment.

"I'll be right there."

Giving instructions to put him on an oxygen mask, Toshio hung up the phone. He gave a faintly wry smile to Mutou who had been watching him. To be honest, he had the feeling he'd just been saved.

"Sorry. Giichi-san's in bad shape. Sorry about this, but can I have you bring my condolence money for me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Give my regards to Shimizu-san."

Toshio crossed the road to the Yasumori Lumberyard diagonally across it, hurrying into the living quarters where Atsuko and her daughter-in-law Junko were waiting.

"How is he?"

"We put him on oxygen according to your instructions, but there's

been no change," said Atsuko. Giichi had been ill a long time. The Maruyasu household had studied well, and in terms of frequent in-home care, they had prepared an ideal environment in terms of in-home nursing but Giichi's condition slowly deteriorated.

"Rales?"

"Wet crackling sounds. It looks like he's also had some incontinence, it's very similar to when he had pneumonia before."

Toshio headed down the hallway to the living room with a nod. Giichi had difficulty swallowing normally due to the Parkinson's disease. It was easy for aspiration to occur, and the family was aware of that and had thorough knowledge of respiration treatments but, if he had had aspiration a few days ago, he had suspicions of aspiration pneumonia.

Entering the living room that had become a sickroom, Toshio nodded at Giichi's form. The beginning stages of cyanosis were occurring. The oxygen was having no effect. Likely acute respiratory failure due to pneumonia.

Toshio performed a brief examination as he instructed Atsuko to call an ambulance. Her daughter-in-law Junko rushed to the phone in the sickroom. Toshio becked Atsuko into the hallway.

"Just like you said, Atsuko-san, it's probably pneumonia. We can take an X-ray to be sure of the exact disease responsible but before that we should perform artificial respiration. He may need a tracheotomy."

Atsuko nodded with a stiff expression. Considering the look on her face that seemed to want to ask him something, Toshio nodded.

"Now that his disease has progressed, his physical strength has declined. It might be better to prepare yourselves for the worst, this time."

Yes sir, Atsuko nodded.

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"Kaori, you have your juzu beads, yes?"

"....Mm."

Kaori nodded while thinking again and again inside of her head that it was Megumi's funeral. She couldn't believe it. Wasn't a funeral always supposed to be something for old people? It had no relation to Kaori. A funeral was something her mother and father went to while Kaori watched the house. Yet Kaori had to go. Her mother who had helped from beginning to end had left the house. There was help to be given at the funeral.

Kaori saw her leave and watched TV with Akira. She was with Akira sitting in the living room but none of the contents of the program made it into her thoughts. Watching an ordinary program felt terrible strange. Somehow it all felt so inappropriate. The images, the sounds, they all slid over her consciousness without taking hold.

"Hey, Kaori."

At Akira's voice, Kaori gave a half-hearted response.

"It's kinda weird, huh?"

"What is?"

"Three people died in one swoop in Yamairi, right? That was just a little while ago. Then on top of that this time it's Megumi. --- Megumi was pretty healthy until just recently wasn't she? Then, all of a sudden, like."

"That's right."

"Even though nothing happened, just dying out of the blue like that, yeah? Three people. Megumi too, huh? I'd get it if something happened, if she'd been hospitalized for a while, but..."

Kaori turned her gaze to Akira's extremely solemn profile. "...But the truth is, nothing happened."

"That's true but," Akira said still looking at the TV. "It's kind of strange."

Kaori didn't reply. She couldn't turn it aside saying these kind of things happened. Kaori was certain that was something that she would never be able to do with this. Like someone could just suddenly cease to be there anymore like this. And of course, if she couldn't do that, then that the same programs as usual could be broadcast, that she could be sitting with her little brother like this in the tea room, that somewhere someone was having a similar all night vigil and a funeral---like it was nothing at all, like nothing special or important happened, that it could all be handled trustfully absolutely was a mistake.

But because Kaori couldn't express that well, she settled for quietly nodding.

Something was, strange.

While she thought, the program ended and she stood.

"...I'll be back."

Kaori pushed the wrinkles out of her uniform, took a small pouch with her and left the house. She was sure come September she would hate to wear this uniform again.

Heading out, today's weather was sunny. The gaping blue skies, the bright white lights. The reflection off of the asphalt was blinding. She narrowed her eyes against it, trudgingly walking along. The road she was used to taking every morning. The way she had walked many, many times to invite Megumi. Yet, as she neared the specific house, it was as unfamiliar as an unknown house. The

flower wreathes and the black and white walls. The tent beside the gateposts, the people gathered in the street. Those people too were all in black and white.

That was why the one a little ahead in grey pants stood out so terribly. He was standing amidst black and white. A white shirt and grey uniform pants, a tall and thin figure. Right next to him was a girl in a white and light blue uniform, so all the more he stood out.

(He came to the funeral for you...)

It was just a little, but she felt happiness. A white shirt well starched, clean creased pants. Even if it was the same uniform, it looked different on him somehow. Do all boys from the city have that air about them, she wondered. Right beside him stood a boy in a black and white outfit. Even though he and that boy had a similar hairstyle, something about it looked different. What was different or how, Kaori didn't know.

(Aren't you glad, Megumi?)

She whispered in her heart, and until a housewife from the neighborhood urged her to enter, Kaori continued to gaze at him.

Megumi remembered the late summer greeting card when the incense was being burned. The sutras were still being chanted but most of the condolence callers gathered in the tatami room stepped outside once the incense was burned. Kaori slipped through the waves of people who had left the room, towards the entryway. In the entrance way, right at the stairway was a black and white curtain blocking the way. Right in front of that was a desk with gifts of gratitude for attendance piled up; it wasn't a situation in which she could easily go upstairs.

(What should I do?)

Hurriedly leaving the entryway, those who would be in the funeral procession were loitering out front. Seen split off a ways from that was Natsuno, talking to a girl next to him. It was a face she had seen a few mornings. She had seen her talking to Natsuno

several times, too. If she remembered right, she was a girl from his neighborhood, right? Mutou Aoi she was called, she believed. She remembered Megumi saying, as if relieved, that she was two grades above Natsuno.

(What should I do...)

Once again, Kaori turned towards the entryway. The black and white curtain, the people in black and white forming a line there. If she tried to give it to him another day, then Kaori didn't have more than a scrap of a vague idea where his house was.

Kaori sucked in a small breath and worked her way through the crowds of people towards Natsuno.

"Uhm... You're Yuuki-san, aren't you?"

Being meekly called out to, Natsuno lightly furrowed his brows. "And?" A curt voice answered.

"I am Tanaka Kaori. I am Megumi's childhood friend."

"Hnn."

Kaori was aware herself of her voice becoming higher pitched. "Uhm, I am sorry. There is something that I would like to deliver to you no matter what. Tomorrow, may I have you please meet with me someplace?"

The young man besides him poked at Natsuno.

"Natsuno, you sly dog, you."

"What?" After glaring at the young man, he looked to Kaori. "What do you want to deliver to me?"

"Uhm, ...That's. It isn't me so much as Megumi.... It is from Megumi."

"What's the point of that?" Natsuno made a sharp eyed expression. "I only came because our parents know each other, I'm not exactly

close with Shimizu. I don't have any reason to accept anything from her."

"But...."

As if he didn't hear what Kaori was saying at him, Natsuno turned back to the young man at his side.

"Let's go, Tohru-chan. It's hot here."

"But, the procession?"

The young man seemed to be looking back and forth between Natsuno and Kaori but Natsuno was less hospitable.

"It's fine isn't it, even if we don't stay just to watch. I don't have any obligation to stand in for the burial, and with no shade around just don't want to." Saying such carelessly, Natsuno prodded the young man. He smiled as if he had forgotten Kaori. "You're gonna treat me to shaved ice, right?"

"Natsuno, you sure about that?"

Tamotsu asked looking behind them, as Natsuno glared at him. Tamotsu held up both hands.

"Sorry. YuukiKoide. ---Who was that?"

"Like I know?"

"You sure about that, being so cold with her. She wanted to deliver it, isn't that an article of the deceased?"

"I don't have any reason to accept it."

"Even if you don't have a reason, she does. That's why she bothered to stop you at all."

"But I hate Shimizu."

Aoi looked at Natsuno with shock. "Natsu, you're scum!"

"Leave me alone. She was always trying to get involved with me,

it was just sad, man."

"You're going to speak that badly about a girl who's gone?"

"Even if you say that much, I really didn't even know her," Natsuno said looking to Aoi sulkily. "I didn't even really have a reason to attend the funeral, but dad kept pushing, go, go, and you guys were so noisy about me coming with you, so I just came along. I didn't even have enough of a connection to her for that, from the start."

"But, delivering an article of the dead would mean it's a distribution of mementos. It's just polite to say thanks and accept it."

"I refuse. Accepting a momento of someone you don't even know that well just feels wrong doesn't it?"

Tamotsu gave an exaggerated shrug. "You really do just do whatever you feel like, huh?"

"Then, if it was Tamocchan, you'd take it?"

"If it's just accepting it I could at least do that much. But I might throw it away later."

"Which one of us is scum, huh?"

Tohru sighed. "You two really are bratty kids, huh?"

"What's that?" the two asked threateningly, earning a forced smile from Tohru.

"Well, it's fine. Let's go grab a shaved ice. It's definitely unbearably hot."

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Biting her lip, Kaori went up the mountain path.

When she raised her eyes to the front of the line, the coffin with a white cloth draped over it was solemnly going up the hill. The shadows falling from the tips of the firs were a gloomy blue, and in exchange for a break in the mid summer heat wave, the mountain path whose wild underbrush was mowed away at the last moment left the densely lingering smell of dirt and grass.

---Megumi was being sucked away into the firs.

(Megumi...)

Kaori tightly gripped her juzu beads. It was too fast of a death. She must have had regrets, how many things undone were there?

Thinking of that, Natsuno who had completely turned his back on her was loathsome. She had wanted to deliver it to him because it was filled with her feelings. Surely she must have desperately longed to send it. And yet.

(....Cruel.)

Even though Megumi was dead. Even though she was no longer here. Even though it was so pitiable, Natsuno didn't feel an ounce of it towards Megumi. ---And it wasn't just Natsuno.

Kaori turned a ear to the murmurings of the adults surrounding her who were climbing upwards. A sudden death, she was too young, poor Shimizu-san, what made her die so suddenly anyway, even though she was always so healthy.

From there, the conversations slid. Someone from such and such lost their child, in a family someone else knew. Talk of people who had no connection to Megumi, and then talk of Yamairi. Idle gossip that hadn othing to do with death. And then suddenly, the topic

returned back over to Megumi. In the first place, when nobody knew where she was before Bon, that time, what happened, anyway? And from there, whispers she couldn't bear to hear. There was no mistaking something happened. After all, she was such a capacious girl, they knew it'd come to this someday.

(It's cruel, isn't it... Megumi.)

Nobody was grieving Megumi's death. Even though Megumi died, she wasn't being treated as if she had.

The head of the procession halted. With her head hung in shame, biting her lip, Kaori didn't notice that, continuing forward ahead and bumping into a girl's back.

Between the trees was a long and narrow plot where the grass was mowed away, and there was opened in the dirt a deep black hole. Kaori was suddenly stiff with dread and nerves. The hole that would swallow Megumi. Megumi would be put in there, buried, and vanish from this world. The forest of firs held countless graves, it had swallowed up this many dead already, and it would probably go on to swallow many more. And one day, Kaori's own turn would come.

(....One day?)

Megumi, too, no doubt thought "some day." But, it was already Megumi's turn. Nobody knew when it would be. In that case, even Kaori's turn could come. How could she state emphatically that it wouldn't be tomorrow?

Some day---possibly even tomorrow, it could be, the day after tomorrow, it really was coming some day, the day Kaori would be swallowed up in a hole and no longer be in this world.

(I'm scared...)

Just imagining it was terrifying, and then, when she thought about Megumi going off to that, desperation hit her. She couldn't avoid that, no matter what.

Before the trembling Kaori's very eyes, the coffin was lowered down upon platforms like a ladder. The manager of the Mourning Crew rang a small bell and the Junior Monk from the temple began reciting the sutras. Minute by minute, hour by hour, the time when Megumi would be severed from this world drew nearer.

(Poor Megumi. ...Even though she was just 15.)

Yes, just fifteen. Megumi, born in August, was for a small time the same age as Kaori born in June. That's right, she thought. Megumi was the same age as Kaori. If Megumi died, then it wouldn't be

strange for Kaori to die either.

She would almost have been sixteen, Kaori thought, realizing it really would have been just a little further. Megumi's birthday was August 26th. There were no stylish articles to dress up with in the village, so Kaori rarely went out to the town of Mizobe. Recently, when brought along casually by her mother to do some shopping, she had bought a present for Megumi, she remembered. It was properly wrapped. She was supposed to give that to her and yet. Kaori turned her head to look back. The Shimizu family graves were near the Sue no Yama mountain, not too deep in. From here it wasn't far to Kaori's house. Why couldn't she have remembered earlier? They could have lowered it into the hole with her.

"Uhm... Ma'am." Kaori turned to look at Hiroko, who had been crying her eyes out. "I prepared a present for Megumi-chan. Would I be able to go back to get it? I want to put it into the grave with her."

Hiroko opened her eyes and gave a troubled look to the people around her. The men with the rope in hand lowering the coffin, too, exchange troubled glances.

"Even if you ask, now, it's, y'know."

"Now!" said a small voice, from Kaori's mother. "What is this all of a sudden. You're being a pest!"

One of the working men spoke as if to take back the sentiment. "No, I'm sure just the feelings alone would have made the deceased happy. I mean, whether it's really put in or not isn't what matters." That's right, nodded several people, and Hiroko too gave a sad smile. "Thank you, Kaori-chan. But, the feeling is enough."

"....Yes, ma'am."

Kaori hung her head in shame. Nobody, nobody understood Kaori's feelings. Even though Megumi was dead. Even though Kaori lost Megumi.

"Uhm...." raised a quiet voice, that of the Junior Monk. "How about perhaps allowing her to go and bring it?"

Kaori raised her face. She was met with a mild and gentle smile.

"It will take time to place the dirt after all, could we not leave an opening at the front bedside portion? She is her friend, isn't she? In that case, I think that Megumi-chan would want us to do this, too, and if the young lady holds onto the present that she had gone through the trouble to prepare, there will be sentiments within her heart as well that will be difficult for her to bury."

Haa, said the working men. "If the Junior Monk's saying so, then..."
"Thank you very much." Kaori lowered her head. Realizing that her feelings were understood, she was truly happy. The young monk gave a peaceful nod.

"Be careful on your way."

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Natsuno returned to his room and stripped off his uniform throwing it recklessly aside. Succumbing to the hot air trapped in his room he opened the window. For an instant he moved to close the curtain as usual but, he soon remembered there was no need to do that.

---Right, there's no need to do that anymore.

Natsuno stared out the window into the firs looming close their backyard. There was only a low stone wall left as the barrier to the backyard. It was indeed an antiqued and mossed over the old stone wall, but it only came up to about Natsuno's calf. Still, it was a tentative boundary line. Within the wall were a dense thicket of growth. Looking at it from Natsuno's bedroom window, one had a full frontal view of it. The underbrush about half as tall as Natsuno were, according to his mother, raspberry plants.

(Megumi's dead.)

In those raspberries' shadows. Pressed up against the trunk of a fir, Natsuno knew that Megumi stood there time and time again. It started when the weather became less severe, it became incessant during spring break, then for a while there had been longer stretches but lately it had picked up again. From the bowers, she stared at the window. ---Natsuno did know, of course, what that meant.

Megumi was always like that, Natsuno thought. Visiting the house of her one-sided love, secretly peeping through the window. That was probably, as seen by Megumi herself, a brave and lovable thing to do. He was certain she was doing that to play the part of a

maiden in love, enjoying the pain of one-sided feelings to its fullest. Maybe she even had expectations of it. Like that the one who found her standing there like that would be touched by Megumi's love and accept and return her feelings.

But, Natsuno would emphatically pass on that role. Megumi didn't get it. Megumi was caught up in her own little world, without a thought to spare to the likes of the other's mind in the matter. If that weren't the case, then she shouldn't have been able to fail to realize that of course Natsuno would be uncomfortable with her peeking into his house like this, invading his privacy.

Give me a break, he thought. Megumi had expectations of certain courtesies from Natsuno. It was expected that today, he should grieve even the loss of that girl, should thankfully receive her articles. He was supposed to be touched by Megumi's sentiments, or maybe she'd have liked him to let a single tear slip out.

(....Like a school play.)

What Megumi expected Natsuno to be was her partner in what was nothing more than a high school romantic drama. What that girl expected of Natsuno was to take on the role of the one-sided love interest of the heroine who died young and tragically. That was the role that everybody was assigning to Natsuno. A boy from the big city who moved into the village set up as a foil to her, or possibly the one with emptiness in his heart from the harsh city life, the one who didn't notice her there. While thrusting these roles onto people, Natsuno was condemned to follow their script. No one---really, not a one---realized that it was just a self-centered scenario she had set up for herself.

"A real laugh."

Natsuno spit outwards into the raspberry fields.

Natsuno hated Megumi. He knew what Megumi expected. Those were expectations Megumi came up with on her own. But, Megumi was not aware that those were nothing more than self-important expectations. She wanted him to say this, to respond like this, while she didn't state that up front, she tried to direct the flow of

conversation to make him say the expected lines, to take the expected actions.

--I'm not very sophisticated compared to those city girls, huh?

--Natsuno-kun, you hate me, don't you?

--You look like you're going to tell me not to even look at you again or something.

It was exploitation to get what he wasn't putting out. Natsuno was firmly set against having the role she wanted him to play thrust onto him, but in this village people not only threw themselves into those kind of exchanges, they didn't even realize they were being made to play a part, or worse still they thought it was a virtue, to play to their partner's expectations.

(It's a village wide circus act.)

Megumi cast Natsuno as her partner in her love story on her own. While doing as much, Megumi herself was only acting the part of a love story's heroine, in nothing more than a superficial dream. It wasn't something she longed for with any urgency. She was just playing a girl in love, immersed in her own self satisfaction. Megumi was the incredibly predictable, not remotely complex type.

But---Natsuno thought. Even that Megumi had one single thing that she would put on a serious face for, and that was when talking about the city. She said she hated the village, wanted to go out to the city. In that alone could he see a real drive in her, and on that alone did Natsuno sympathize.

Megumi was always saying she was going to a college in a city. To tell the truth, Natsuno didn't really believe it. While making a fuss that she was definitely going to go, Megumi didn't show any signs of actually preparing to do that. Saying she wanted to go here or there for school, when offering up names she had nothing but ones she'd just heard in passing, which were all good schools, and yet Megumi didn't care about her own grades. Natsuno wanted to leave the village too. To do that, he thought, he would go to a college in a city come hell or high water. That was why he was

preparing for that. If he could at least just return to the city, he wouldn't be picky about the college or the department, he had even thought. Looking at it from that enduring Natsuno's perspective, he didn't think that Megumi's so called escape plan had much feasibility, and that while she might have said this and that, in the end Megumi would, just like it seemed had apparently happened with high school entrance exams, at the eleventh hour, find some reason like that her parents wouldn't permit it and betray herself. She'd be stopped up in the village while saying some day for sure, and doubtlessly take up root in the village.

He thought of Megumi as that kind of person but Natsuno did at least have the feeling that the sentiment of wanting to leave the village was sincere. And Megumi----died.

Megumi really did break out of Sotoba, through death. Or maybe it should have been said that death allowed her out of Sotoba, or that she wouldn't have broken out at all by any means other than death.

---Maybe the same went for him.

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The burial finished, the party returned to the Shimizu house, gathering in the tatami room for the meal. Seishin had done nothing more than perform the simple ceremony and thus was as usual hesitant about sitting at the guest of honor's seat at the head of the table.

Megumi's grandfather Shimizu Tokurou was once a central figure, having taken part in the village Diet. In his youth he was vigorous and prosperous, with an abundance of anecdotes to tell. Shimizu Takeo, his son, too, was an extraordinarily upright man. The hot blooded and easily excited Tokuro and the cool and theoretical Shimizu, were mirror opposites yet with a thread of commonality between them, so Seishin had thought for a long time. But, those two were seated as if beaten down. If it was rare to see Tokurou so worn down as to not express his emotions, then it was also rare for Shimizu to openly display his emotions without regard for who was watching.

Hiroko was both, yet neither. When you thought that the damn would break and she would wail and cry, she sat like an expressionless doll. When you thought that the comforting words from around her were earning a look on her face as if finding some peace, she would talk of her own grief, and in doing that like the lid was off the barrel of her emotions, her voice rung out with sobs. She would cry for a while when her eyes would raise like cloudy glass orbs, and as if a spring was cut fell into lethargic despondency.

The three seemed as if they hadn't come back to themselves. They most likeley must have felt that a part of them was deserted in the mountains. Seishin again had no words for the situation. Seeing

them like this, he knew the words "Do not be too broken spirited" would hold no meaning. Megumi was too young. It was probably impossible not to be broken spirited.

Tokurou who always looked ten years younger than he was, today seemed more aged than his years, and the same to Hiroko. Her back rounded as she slouched forward with her head hung, mysteriously overlapped with that of Gotouda Fuki in his mind.

(...It would be best to be prepared.)

The words suddenly came to mind. ---Yes, it would be best to be prepared. Accept Megumi's death, and prepare to stand again from that even a moment sooner. You can't be discouraged. You must not dwell in this grief.

(But, how can I say something like that to all of these people here now?)

Seishin turned his eyes to Hiroko, with her open sobs. At times acting like the Shimizu he remembered, his hand would go to Tokurou's back, as if protecting his aged father, but at the same time it seemed as if he were clinging to his father, earnestly trying to keep himself in check. That was heart breaking, and at the same time something about it looked dangerous.

These people were all past their limits in bearing the shock of Megumi's death. Right now, their hands were full with that, and to want anything more of them was cruelty. None the less, Seishin couldn't help but want to pat each and everyone one of them on the back and say that they musn't be brought down. The thing was that Seishin himself didn't know why he felt such an impatient unease. But.

(It would be no good to do it like that.)

He had to stop the crying, quickly.

---When children cry the oni come.

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Chapter 8 Translation Notes

General

Juzu -

Prayer Beads used in Japanese Buddhism, their use is similar to a Catholic rosary with beads meant to keep track of counting the sutras while they are chanted. There is also the belief that the good karma leaking off from the chanting of sutras may reside in the juzu. Sutras are typically chanted 108 times as there are believed to be 108 attachments or afflictions that plague man. If more than 108 are to be chanted, some sects start going backwards around the ring of beads to signify breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. The shapes vary between sects as do the appropriate ways of holding them when in use. The formal, larger ones with 108 beads are typically two-ringed, with or without two to four smaller beads dispersed between them. Informal ones may have fewer than 108, are a single ring, and have between 18 and 45 beads usually in some number that divides evenly into 108. Men's informal juzu tend to have larger but fewer beads, women more but smaller. The tassels also come in forms ranging from loose to braided to balled; the tassel style is largely a matter of taste. The appropriate way to hold them between the hands, over one hand, over both, beneath the thumbs, etc. varies by sect.

Examples of

men

and

women's

informal juzu from

<http://www.butsudanya.co.jp>.

Examples

of holding/use styles by sect from Echo Sekizai.

Chapter 8 - 2

Megumi refers to Natsuno with -sama in her postcard. In formal and very proper letter writing, it isn't uncommon to refer to recipient with -sama even if that would certainly never be used in interactions. This should not be mistaken for a fawning, empty-headed idol worship form of address.

Chapter 8 - 3

Dance of the Straw Coat - A form of torture that involved wrapping a person in a straw coat, as was at times used as a rain coat in the feudal era, and lighting them on fire. It was a form of torture often used on Christians during their persecution in Japan.

Chapter 8 - 5

The flower wreathes and the black and white walls. -

Typical scenery at a Japanese funeral.

It's not unusual to have the service and all night vigil in the home, particularly in small areas with no funeral parlor or undertaker.

Example

of a typical all night vigil/funeral service for Zetsubou Sensei's titular character, in paper craft form. It includes the black and white funeral curtains hung to signify a funeral. Notice the lid is off on the coffin, but that the lid has an opening over the face, to open for those who wish to view it when the lid is in place.

Source blog.

Has more pictures including the hearse and reception.

Shaved Ice

- Popular summer treat similar to a snow cone, ground more finely to the consistency of soft snow and topped with condensed milk as well as the syrup.

Example

from Wikimedia Commons.

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1

News of Yasumori Giichi's death reached the temple the day after Shimizu Megumi's funeral, when Bon came to a close. Seishin took the message, thinking, indeed it had come to this. The night before, he had received contact from both Toshio and the Maruyasu sawmill that he was in critical condition. Even before that, it was clear that Giichi, who had already been suffering for a long time now, didn't have long left.

With that perhaps as the reason, the voice of Kazunari from the Maruyasu sawmill, was exceedingly calm in relaying his death. During this Bon, all members of the family had gathered and were able to spend the holidays with Giichi, and they were glad for that, said Kazunari. While taking the message Seishin was composed enough to offer words of comfort about how Giichi was likely able to begin his journey satisfied with that.

"Kazunari-san is managing the sawmill splendidly, and Kazuyakun has a fine wife. This may be rude to say, but I think that Giichi-san was free of worries or regrets."

"That's right," Kazunari said into the receiver, seeming to be smiling. "We were unable to show him a great grandchild, so as far as disappointments go, there is indeed one. But still, having a good wife in the family, it seemed that father was pleased with that much."

"That may be so."

"The wife and my son's wife got along well with him, too. My old man struggled to the end trying not to be selfish with them."

"It's true," Seishin could nod, without any staging involved. Seishin was the same, caring for a patient who was, rather than having health that seesawed up and down, taking two steps back for every step forward. He understood well the emotions of those of the Maruyasu household. "You have truly worked hard. Kazunari-san, and Giichi-san alike."

"Thank you," Kazunari said, his voice becoming tight.

"He's died, has he? Giichi-san," asked Mitsuo as Seishin hung up the phone.

"Yes. Just now, at the National Hospital. The Mourning crew's manager for Monzen is Tokujiro-san, who is a relative, so Tamo's Sadaichi-san will probably assume the role."

"Is that so," sighed Mitsuo. "Now that it's come to losing Giichi-san, Sumi-kun and his his father and brother will have to help us, won't they?"

Seishin nodded. Yasumori Giichi, until he had passed it on to his younger brother Tokujirou, had served as the parish family representative. He had also helped as the leader of the temple helpers, making him an integral person to the temple. For a funeral for such a man, Seishin and an attendant monk would not suffice. As the acting head, he would need to have several others involved to serve the role of the assistants to the head priest. They would also have to seek consultation on determining his posthumous name with the honorary Ingou.

"This's gonna be hard," Ikebe sighed. "With that said, it'll be easier in a way than Megumi's, though."

Tsurumi's face furrowed. "You're saying such impudent things again."

"That's true," said Mitsuo turning to face the blackboard as he shook his head. "We shouldn't say it but now that you've said it, it certainly will be easier. Shuuji-san and Megumi-chan and the like, those funerals where the older ones are burying the younger ones, put a strain on us, too."

At Mitsuo's words, Seishin of course, everyone really, did let out a relieved breath. It was a peaceful death, Seishin thought. Of course, that didn't change what it meant to be dead but this felt how death was supposed to.

A reasonable death. An old man returning to the mountains. He was born as a human, spent his youth in the village, performed his work and built a family, and was then finished with his tasks. It was as if he could watch him from behind as he departed with a self-composed gait into the mountains. At last he was freed from his sickbed, from his suffering, and his family too released from their fear and concern on his behalf. To Giichi perhaps it was a blessing. He went on not to know the tragedies to come.

In his heart, Seishin folded his hands, wondering about his own thoughts. What were "The tragedies to come?" What tragedies could have been in store for Giichi beyond this? Giichi was ill. His family nursed him fruitlessly, his condition worsening day by day, and he'd heard that in the end he couldn't even lift up from his pillow. The man's own agony must have been severe, and he must have had concerns about troubling those around him, and of course, he must have had uneasiness regarding his own impending death, without a doubt. Ending short any remaining years of being bound to the bed in ever increasing agony, when one thought about it, might have been a blessing indeed, but "he went on not to know the tragedies to come" was subtly a different sentiment than that.

Seishin considered his own thoughts and then found the unease within himself.

Shuuji's death was a tragedy. Megumi's death too was another tragedy. And it was just the start of a string of serial tragedies.

Death spread through the village as a disease, to bring on repeated tragedies to come. That was---his premonition.

sinnesspiel

2

"Doctor, something from Tajima National Health Institute's arrived, were you waiting on something?"

At Towada's voice, Toshio looked up from the document he was reading. It was the written report on Giichi's death from somebody he knew at the National hospital. As expected Giichi had pneumonia. The cause of death was gram positive cocci, and arrhythmia caused by heart failure.

"It's come? Sorry, but could you fish out just Megumi-chan's results for me?"

"Megumi---Shimizu-chan, you mean?"

"Right," Toshio said, as Towada nodded knowledgeably and turned back. Soon there was the sound of someone hurrying, and Mutou rather than Towada came back with a single sheet of paper.

"Sorry about that, Mutou-san."

Toshio took the test results and looked to the main entries. Her total red blood cell count, white blood cell count, and platelet count were down, and her hemoglobin concentration and hematocrit were reduced as well. In contrast, her reticulocyte count was high, and her serum iron levels, TIBC, and serum ferritin levels were normal.

Toshio's brows furrowed. ---These were not happy results.

"How is it?"

Being spoken to, Toshio finally realized that Mutou was still standing in front of his desk, trying to peek, himself. He felt like telling him to let it go but Mutou was close to Shimizu. Never mind that Toshio was the one to say it was anemia, Megumi did suddenly

die. Regardless of the difference in degree of sentiment, Mutou may have been the same in feeling some kind of guilt or something towards Shimizu.

"Ah--- yeah."

"Anemia after all?"

Toshio took a breath. "There was anemia. But, while it was anemia---it wasn't iron deficiency anemia. I misdiagnosed."

That can't be! Mutou made a grievous face.

"Serum iron levels, TBIC and serum ferritin, all of them are entirely within the normal range. If it were iron deficiency anemia, then their levels not being low is strange."

"But the results only came back today," Mutou said, dismayed. "That's right, that's, you shouldn't, you couldn't have made an accurate diagnosis until the results came in, you aren't a fortune teller after all. The reason the results came back late was because it was the Bon holiday----"

"It's nothing for you to get that worked up over," Toshio said with a strained smile. "Anemia is usually iron deficiency anemia. Especially since she was a young girl, any doctor would suspect that first. Certainly saying that there was nothing to worry about without due consideration was my mistake, but," the inside of his mouth was bitter but once he'd spit the words out and acknowledged it it felt better. "it might have been better to hurry the results. If I'd done that then at least the worst case scenario might've been avoided. ---That's what I was thinking but somehow or another it looks like that's not how it was."

"Ha?"

Toshio took a calculator out from the desk drawer.

"Mean corpuscular volume, mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration." He tried to calculate them roughly based off of the red blood cell count, hemoglobin concentration, and the hematocrit.

"and the reticulocyte count are high. That'd mean normocytic normochromic anemia, then."

Mutou blinked. "What does that..."

"There are three general classifications of anemia. If it was iron deficiency anemia, it would be microcytic hypochromic anemia. With macrocytic hypochromic anemia, that's three. Normocytic normochromic anemia occurs with acute bleeding, or possibly hemolysis, and if not that than aplastic anemia, or secondary anemia. But, in Megumi-chan's case, there weren't any particular external wounds and there were no signs of heavy internal bleeding. Total bilirubin, direct reacting bilirubin, LDH, haptoglobin--each of them are within normal parameters. That means the odds of hemolysis are low. With her high reticulocyte count, the odds of aplastic anemia are low. No problems with her other biochemical results, either."

"Haa," Mutou blinked, tilting his head. "...So, what does that mean that it was?"

"I don't know." Toshio toyed with the exam results in his hand. "I don't really know the cause. But at least what is confirmed is that it was secondary anemia. Besides sudden death, there was something wrong with some part of her body. And, that it was a big problem that couldn't be discerned from a glance. It was that problem that lead to the anemia showing."

"And so.... an example would be?"

"Like I know? Even if these results came out the day I examined her, all I'd have been able to do is a reexamination. The most I could have done is look if there was something wrong somewhere somehow with a thorough analysis but, there wasn't enough time for me to have done that and gotten any results. ---That's what it means."

Ah, Mutou said seeming slightly relieved. "Is that so?"

"This wouldn't likely have gotten any different result if I'd sent her straight to the university hospital or to a large hospital with the

appropriate equipment for one of their top physicians to examine her. I mean, there were only three days until it was all over. That's why even if I were a fortune teller it wouldn't have worked. Of course, even if a fortune teller could nail the cause, they wouldn't be able to provide treatment, but."

"Then it was," Mutou said, sounding as if it were complicated. "bad luck, wasn't it."

Toshio gave an all the more bitter smile. "It's possible there were symptoms besides anemia, though. If there were, they wouldn't have been something that just started that day or the day before, though. And that little lady had a habit of kicking up a fuss any time anything felt the slightest bit off. So the people around her thought it was the usual too, took it lightly and forgot about it, probably, I'd bet. ---Well, no matter what, it's nothing but speculation, now."

Megumi was already dead. The corpse was in the ground. In the heat that had become the norm, the decay was probably already fairly far along. He didn't think Shimizu would agree to a pathological autopsy now, and literally digging up old buried bones at this point wouldn't have a point.

"This must be what they mean by a natural life span," Mutou said, shaking his head as he spoke with deep emotion. "All too short, all too out of our hands."

Toshio nodded.

"---You said it."

sinnesspiel

3

Yano Tae hurried through the afterglow of the dusk. Coming to Kami-Sotoba, she visited the Gotouda household.

She peered into the house from the veranda, the thin smell of incense lingering from the inside. Gotouda Fuki who had just lost her son was bedridden in her dimly lit living room. The TV was on, empty and superficial shouts of joy flowing out. The entire scene was indeed lonely. It could only be thought of as highlighting Fuki's isolation.

"Fuki-san," her voice came from the veranda. Twice, three times it called out when Fuki finally stirred. It seemed like she had dozed off.

"....Tae-chan."

Tae spoke in a deliberately encouraging voice as Fuki tried to rise to meet her.

"I made too much for dinner again. I made it into a packed lunch, how about having it together?"

Fuki smiled and bowed her head in a nod. That movement was indeed that of an aging woman, and Tae realized a stirring in her chest. Fuki-san was getting smaller. Have we really gotten so old, she found herself thinking lately, three times more than usual.

"Sorry for the trouble all the time," Fuki smiled at Tae.

"It's fine, I just made too much is all."

Tae came up into the living room and placed the wrapped goods onto the low table, opening them up. Fuki rose to prepare the tea but the kitchen she had started towards was already cleaned up, with no signs of having prepared dinner for herself.

"...Would hot tea work, I wonder?"

"I wouldn't mind. Barley tea could be good, too."

She waited for Fuki to return to the living room. As if Fuki were worn out, something about her footsteps seemed unsteady.

"I thought you might not need me to make dinner for you but it looks like it wasn't a problem. Are you eating right?"

Fuki gave a smile that seemed forced.

"I wonder if I'm suffering from the summer heat? ... It seemed like so much work."

"That's no good, not eating like that."

"That's true," Fuki nodded. Opening the lid to the offerings, she wanted to say "it looks delicious" but she didn't seem to have much sign of an appetite. Bit by bit, Tae used her chop sticks to portion it out with her.

"....Fuki-chan, won't you move in with one of your children?" Tae asked. Shuuji had died but she still had two children left.

"My son did say for me to come," Fuki said disinterested.

"Wouldn't that be better? It's not safe, an old lady living alone."

"...I can't get motivated."

"By the time you are motivated, you might not be able to move anymore. If you're living together, If you're going to live with them, then you should try to be useful while your body's still in good condition. If you end up having to be taken care of, nobody will come to live with you."

That's true, was said again with a clear air of indifference.

"Fuki-san, you, isn't your face seeming pale?"

"Oh?" Fuki tilted her head.

"I wonder if you aren't sick? Somehow, it seems you might be."

Before she was asleep and such, and it seemed she had no appetite. Tae peered at her childhood friend's face.

"You must be worn out, yes? ...With two funerals, it's to be expected, yes."

Tae nodded. Funerals took a toll on the elderly. Especially when it was a family member or someone around the same age who died, a lethargy hit as if the energy were sapped out of them. More than being merely worn out by the little tasks involved, the confirmation that you were at an age where it wouldn't be odd to die like that too brought you down.

"Are you all right?"

Fuki nodded. Her shoulders were hunched, her eyes rounded, and she shook her head feebly. The life was sucked out of her---that's how it looked to Tae.

"Wouldn't it be better to move in with somebody after all? Your will will come back."

For a while, Fuki didn't answer. She stared into her tea cup for a time, then at last let out a small murmur.

"....I'm seeing dreams of Shuuji." Fuki smiled at Tae, who blinked. "I saw a dream that Shuuji came back to me. I wonder if Shuuji is coming to take me with him?"

"Fuki-san, that's no good, that kind of thinking."

"....It was a dream.... But, I don't want to leave the village. If I go too far away, I have the feeling I won't see any more dreams like that, so."

Fuki smiled. Tae cast her eyes down. Even if he was dead, she understood well the feeling of not wanting to go to far away from her son.

"Then, you'll have to buck up."

At Tae's words, that's true, Fuki murmured.

sinnesspiel

4

Summer vacation, as usual after Bon, was an excess of spare time. Murasako Masao idly strolled out of the shop. His aging father made eyes at him as if about to say why don't you help out in the store once in a while but he didn't give him the chance to open his mouth, easing out of the store successfully.

That said, he by no means had any place in particular he was going to. In this heat, going through the trouble of getting on the bus to go hang out somewhere was too much work. Matsuo didn't have any particular lessons, nor did he go to cram school. If there was something to leave the village for, he could find somebody to hang out with and somewhere to go but if he was making due with what was in the village, his options were limited to the Mutous. There weren't that many in the village his age. Amongst then half of them were girls, and about half of the boys were flying off to clubs or cram school. They fell into their own groups based on that, and they didn't have much interaction with those like Masao cloistered up in the village whose only ability was gossip.

Reluctantly he started towards the Mutou house. It wasn't that he particularly disliked Mutou Taomotsu or Tamotsu's family by any means but the feeling that if he went there he'd meet someone he did hate was heavy. That said there was no place else to go, and being in his own house would end up even less fun, so there was no choice.

When he went to the Mutou house, Tamotsu's lightly welcomed him. They're upstairs, she said and so he went up to Tamotsu's room where, even though it was Friday, there was Tohru there and Natsuno, too.

Clicking his tongue in his mind, he turned his gaze to Tohru.

"Tohru-chan, you're off today?"

"Yup. Post-bon vacation."

"What's this post stuff?"

"We didn't take a proper vacation during Bon itself. A different bunch claimed the break before us. So, vacations got split up into Bon and After Bon."

"That sounds sucky."

What does, Tohru laughed. "I wouldn't have dared take it. This's what you call consideration. I didn't really have anywhere to go on a trip to anyway, so I was fine without taking the extended break. Since I worked it for them now they owe me. That's an adult's secret to success in life."

That's kind of... He laughed, taking a glance towards Natsuno, who looked disinterested rolling about on Tamotsu's bed looking at a magazine.

"Oi, Natsuno." Being called out to, Natsuno glowered at Masao. Probably because he didn't like being called by his name. He fought down the feel of a sour stomach, continuing on. "I heard you refused Megumi's mometo?"

"And?"

"That's cold, isn't it. Like, do you have some kind of emotional deficiency? Normally, who'd talk about the articles of a dead young girl like they're unclean? You don't have any sense of consideration for anyone else's feelings at all, do you?"

"What're you saying about her dying young? We could die as soon as tomorrow, too."

"That's why I'm saying, don't you feel sorry for someone who died around their first year in high school?"

"That's retarded. Humans never know when or how they're gonna die, it's all a matter of probability. Probabilities aren't concerned with personal feelings or individual traits either."

"Even if you know that, isn't it human not to think a first year high schooler would die? We'd have a lot of regrets, if we were in Shimizu's shoes."

"Being worried over something as extraneous as that's proof you're just worried about your own self. This isn't about someone else's death. I'd worry more about living your life in a way that'd leave you with regrets."

"So you think it's fine to turn down someone's old unfulfilled emotions? You're fine if you get treated like that?"

"Fine with what, if I'm dead I won't even know. Afterwards you become fields and mountains, don't they say?"

"Shimizu is crying down in her grave right now."

"You think the dead cry?"

"She might come after you with a grudge."

"Oni come for bad little children? You're too old for that kind of naivety."

Tohru smiled. "It's an old country thing. Try sharing the info. Your old man at your place'll weep tears of joy."

"....Honestly." Natsuno sighed and closed the magazine. "Then I guess I'll go home to make my old man happy."

"Sure. Later."

Raising his hand, Tohru and Tamotsu raised their hands in response, and Natsuno stepped out of the room. They could hear the light sounds of him going downstairs.

"...What a cheeky punk," Masao muttered, though Tohru nor Tamotsu gave a response. They must have heard, but instead they

attentively watched what looked like an uninteresting TV program on the TV. "That's jerk, he's really cold, isn't he? Hey, Tamotsu, don't you think so?"

Tamotsu lightly taised a shoulder. "Well, it's true he comes off cool."

"He doesn't just come off that way, that's how he really is isn't it? I can't believe it, how do you guys put up with him, Tamotsu, Tohru-chan?"

"What Natsuno says has a ring of truth to it, I guess."

"Tamotsu's on his side, too?"

"That's not the problem. Even I feel sorry for Shimizu. I don't think I could take dying at that age but to tell the truth it's not really my problem. I mean, our dads know each other well and when I was younger I'd played with her, but, like. We're not at an age to play together anymore, and if we didn't go to and come home from school the same way I'd never see her. I was surprised and I felt sorry for her but it's the same kind of sorry I'd feel about something I saw in the paper, it's not like it's hard on me in any kinda way. Ah, that's too bad, is about as much as I think of it. Aren't you the same? I mean you didn't have any connection to Shimizu at all."

"That's, true, but."

"But even still, it's hard on the family and her friends, so when you meet with them, you at least make like it's hard on you, that's just being cooperative. Making Natsuno accept that's a lost cause, though."

"That's the problem, isn't it?"

"It's basically fine, ain't it? In Natsuno's case, he's consistent about it. If it was his own parent or friend who died, like, even if other people acted like it wasn't there problem, he probably wouldn't care. That's consistent in its own way."

"Isn't that just more of a problem? If your parents die and you go

to distribute their goods and someone refuses, anyone who doesn't get mad at that's not even human!"

Tohru gave a strained smile. "Natsuno might seem indifferent, but on the other hand he's rational and fair. For example, like, even if you accuse him like that, he won't try to get us on his side. He probably wouldn't tell us to get mad with him."

Told as much by Tohru, Masao's mouth warped sullenly. He had the feeling that was meant as a criticism of himself.

"Using this case as an example, if we took Natsuno's side and criticized your behavior instead, he probably wouldn't get high handed about it. The most he'd do is say leave it alone, probably. It's a problem between him and you so the rest of Sotoba can stay out of it, he'd say. When it comes to that, Natsuno's thorough."

"So that's how it's going."

"It's just an example. ---Well, since that's how he is, it's fine as it is. You, too, if Natsuno's attitude get you so mad, you don't have to get mad at every little thing. If you just don't like him, you can just ignore him, right?"

"I have to face him at all because you guys are always taking care of him. Don't pin this on me!" Masao said standing up.

"--Masao?"

"I'm leaving," he said shortly, heading down the stairs. It was like he was the one being blamed. Masao didn't have any particular interest in Natsuno. He never wanted to hang out with him, but since Tohru and the others were always looking after him he kept having run ins with him. To start with, wasn't Natsuno the one cutting in? Normally, if you didn't get along with somebody in a group, wouldn't you keep from entering into that group, but Natsuno was irritatingly shameless, and knowing that they didn't get along, Tohru and the others tacitly letting Natsuno in were irritating, too.

(Even though he's an outsider...)

sinnesspiel

5

Taking the beer from the loading crate, Atsushi rang the buzzer.

"Oh my, thank you and sorry for the trouble."

He wordlessly gave the housewife who appeared the pack of canned beer and promptly turned back. Summer was always packed with delivery runs. He was constantly out and about to the point where he hated it. When he thought about how it was unpaid labor, all the more so.

Putting a check on the memo, he confirmed the next destination. There were two houses left, either of them a small distribution of either one bottle of soy sauce or two bottle of sake. If it's just a bottle or two of soy sauce, get it and bring it home yourself, he couldn't help thinking. Throwing the memo pad into the loading case, Atsushi drove off on his bike. He went by the palanquin in Monzen towards the village road. Flying down the village road without looking too closely at his surroundings, he narrowly appeared as if he'd run in with a car heading towards Kami-Sotoba. The driver turned to look back at Atsushi who had slammed on the breaks. He looked about to say something but he couldn't hear it with the window closed.

Atsushi clicked his tongue. He watched the car off with a grudge. He had half a mind to chase after the car and kick his way into it. The truth, that he had ignored the sop sign, was pushed into the back of his consciousness. When he tried to take off on his bike, the engine stalled. That made Atsushi all the more frustrated.

(I can't take this shit.)

Youth all over the world sang songs in praise of summer. Atsushi was smoldering away his own here in this country town. There wasn't anything fun, nothing to stir his chest. He got yelled at by his dad and sent running errands. As Atsushi started the engine, he looked up along the village road. He oughtta really race on up after them, drag the driver out and lay it on them. Even while he thought that, he understood that he'd likely do no such thing.

There was no shadow of the car left. It turned off somewhere into the community of Kami-Sotoba. The road with no signs of life basked in the evening sun, stretching northward. Past here is Yamairi, Atsushi thought.

The old people died. And three people at once. One of them was a relative of Atsushi's. Seems wild dogs attacked the bodies and made a hell of a scene. He'd have liked a chance to see that, he thought. What did a dead person's body look like when all jumbled up? The late Ohkawa Gigorou was a nasty old relative of Atsushi's. With no talent for anything but finding faults in Atsushi, the doddering old far never once gave him any pocket money, never said anything but repeating his idle complaints. If he wasn't complaining about the same things, he'd be pointing out the same faults all the time. If you got annoyed and turned away he'd shout after you. His old man made an unhappy face when Gigorou visited too but Atsushi hated Gigorou, too.

That Gigorou was pulled apart and died. If he could see the corpse, he was sure he'd feel gratification. At the end of that road, wearing out the last embers of the setting sun's glow, at the end of the winding between those deep black looking fir trees. A dead Gigorou, a dead Yamairi.

Mysteriously, he couldn't pull his eyes from that road. Lately, this happened a lot to Atsushi. If he came by this area, without fail he'd end up staring like this at the road that continued into Yamairi.

(I've gotta run the deliveries.)

Drop by drop, he was again using up gas that his old man would yell at him for. Thinking of that, a sudden disgust rose in Atsushi. Why the hell was he being made to do this shit anyway, he thought.

Even while thinking as much, he worried about his dad, and his gentle self put to work. Full of resentment at being made to go on deliveries like this, Atsushi impulsively turned the bike towards the northern village road. ---Where Yamairi was.

Bursting open the throttle, the end of Kami-Sotoba was close at hand. He didn't even have the time to think that he was flying. Before his eyes was the road continuing on pinched between fir trees on either side. Atsushi's speed slowed.

Gigorou was dead, torn to pieces. While he thought that sounded good to him, something sent a chill down the muscles of his back. Some kids had been talking about a dumb rumor when buying a juice at the vending machine in front of the shop. If you continued along this road, you'd come across the blood stained elderly, it went. Their whole bodies were cobbled together, with one part of the body missing. If anyone passed by, they would ask if they knew where it was.

(How stupid.)

Would Gigorou have it in him to come out warped like that? Even if he did come out, the most he could do was stand there and grumble. ---But, maybe because he'd heard that rumor, the lazily sloped hill road that lead into Yamairi felt somehow bathed in a gloomy ambiance. The firs were an umbrella over the road, and with only the rash western sun half-halfheartedly shining onto it, it felt all the darker still.

(Yamairi...)

Dead. Dead bodies. The end of the community. Uninhabited.

Were Gigorou and the other's blood stains left as they were? Were the remains of their bodies still left behind there?

His back stiffened. He could feel himself growing frightened. But that shouldn't have been the case. He wanted to prove it to himself. He wanted to try going to Yamairi.

(If have to hurry on that delivery.)

While thinking such, Atsushi slowly returned along the road. Swallowed up in the shadows of the firs, the surroundings grew quickly dark. As expected the road seemed somehow wasted away. He went about the curve and before him were firs, behind him were firs, without a sign of any people, without any passing cars.

That was when suddenly something from nearby came bursting out at him. From Atsushi's left, from the bushes on the slope facing the northern mountain, something burst out as if to crash into him, and Atsushi and the bike did a barrel roll. With a terrific sound, the bottles broke, giving off the smell of soy and sake.

"What the hell!" Atsushi raised out a loud yell as his body turned. It was lucky he wasn't going very fast. Without even time to survey his surroundings, he caught sight of a nearby haggardly thin dog crouching low. Its fangs were bared, raising a growl.

"What's up, bring it!"

Atsushi swung his hand. The wild dog crouched even lower. Atsushi stood up, moving to rush towards the bike but the dog came rushing after that foot. It held the cuff of his jeans in its mouth and shook its head. He kicked his foot to get loose; just as he'd righted the bike and started the engine, a sharp pain shot through his calf. The wild dog was eating him.

Son of a bitch, he shouted out, wildly kicking his leg in desperation. The wild dog was separated from him with a searing pain. The dog crouched low again. From within the surrounding forest, the sounds of the stirring underbrush, he could hear the dog's growl. Atsushi didn't mind the particulars and took off on the bike. He was forced into a U-turn by a dog that came bursting out as if to lunge at him. From the nearby thickets another dog came flying out but he narrowly managed to avoid it.

Atsushi sped up, short of breath. The words 'son of a bitch' were murmured between his lips as he narrowly made it out into the village, hurrying back towards the shop.

Greeting him as he returned to the shop in a cold, greasy sweat was his father's jeering voice. You're late, where'd you waste the

gas, he shouted, pointing to the wound on his leg. When asked what happened, without thinking he told the full story of his attack by the wild dogs when an open hand smacked out at him. On top of fucking around and bailing out on a delivery, he wasted their merchandise, his father roared with rage.

"On top of that, you get bit by the likes of a dog and come running home with your tail between your legs?! Damn, I ain't never seen no one as hopeless as your ass!"

His father said the words as if spitting them out, giving a kick to Atsushi who had sat down on the floor.

"Hurry up and get to the hospital. Far as I know, the bike ain't broken. The cost of the merchandise is coming out of your pay!"

sinnesspiel

6

On the morning of August 21st, Toshio was awoken by a single telephone. At the sound of the bell that roused him, unpleasant as it was, he woke up to take the receiver with the feeling that it was his day off, damn it. As he picked up the receiver, he realized his sense of *deja vu*.

---Once, this same thing had happened. Surely, the call was to convey bad news.

"Yes, this is Ozaki." On the other end of the phone was a woman's voice. The urgency of that voice, too, was something he remembered, as expected. "Who is this?"

"This is Tamo. Kami-Sotoba's Tamo," the woman's voice was clear.

"Ah---what is it?"

Toshio sat up in bed and reached out his hand for the cigarettes by his pillow. There were many Tamos in the village, and there wasn't just one Tamo household in Kami-Sotoba either, but there was only one house that would be called "Kami-Sotoba's Tamo." That was the Kami-Sotoba's Supermarket's Tamo. Going by the voice, he wasn't talking to Tamo Satomi but to her daughter Yuuko most likely.

"The Gotouda's Fuki has died. I think that she is gone."

Toshio stopped short in his motion to light his cigarette. "----Fuki-san?"

"Early this morning Tae-san from Chigusa came, saying Fuki-san was looking bad. When I tried to go there, she was cold. It doesn't

look like she's breathing, and when I tried to put my ear to her chest, I could not hear any heartbeat. Could you please come?"

"I'll be right there." Toshio abandoned his unlit cigarette in the ashtray. "Please wait at Fuki-san's house. Try not to tamper with anything in the vicinity. ---Can you do that?"

"Yes," he heard from Yuuko as Toshio hung up the receiver. Again, he thought. He had the feeling of having the same thing occurring before him again. Yes, indeed he had experienced this before. When it had been Gotouda Shuuji, it was exactly this same pattern.

When Toshio rushed to the Gotouda house, waiting on the front porch were Tamo Yuuko, Yuuko's father Tamo Sadaji, and the Drive-in Chigusa's Yano Tae. One side of the sliding door was left opened, Tae sitting in that small space with Yuuko and Tamo Sadaji standing on either side of her.

"Doctor." As Toshio pulled onto the lot and stood out of his car, Sadaji ran up to him. "---Sorry about this."

Nah, Toshio said looking at Tae in the corner of his eye. "Tae-san was the one to find her? Where is Fuki-san."

Tae pointed inside from the balcony. "Inside. ...In the living room."

Toshio nodded and had Tae stand. "Lead me there, please. The door is open? Did Tae-san open it?"

"No, it was opened, but. When I called there was no reply, so I went inside."

Toshio patted Tae's shoulder and gave another nod. ---It was summer, she may have left one sliding door opened to let the breeze in. It was only natural to do that in this village.

Tae stood still flustered, cutting through the living room to the entryway. Past the entryway was the inner corridor, and there was the family altar. Around the family altar was a pile of offerings. They were offerings for Shuuji who had just died before. Down the

hallway separate from that was Fuki's bedroom. In that bedroom was laid out one futon, with Fuki's body stretched out within.

There was nothing particularly off around the futon, the cuff of her cotton nightwear was turned upwards but nothing seemed particularly disturbed. Her thin summer bed blanket was over her stomach as if neatly folded there. Without many signs of her sleep having been disturbed, in an instant Toshio resolved that it was not a suicide. In truth when on the road to the Gotouda household, he had predicted as much but looking near the futon there was no cup or sign of any medication or drug about.

Sitting beside the futon and opening his medical bag, Toshio motioned for Tae to sit, too.

"Tae-san, around what time did you come?"

"Uhm, about an hour ago. When I left the house, it was about nine thirty, around then."

"You called out from the porch and came right inside, yes? ---And then?"

"I thought she wasn't doing well.... That is, on Wednesday, she had seemed ill. Sluggish, like. I was worried about that and came yesterday to see how she was doing too but when I had, she was asleep, so."

"Wednesday---the eighteenth?" Taking out his stethoscope, Toshio asked again. "She seemed sick you said, how did you mean?"

Tae shook her head, seeming troubled. "As I said, she seemed sluggish. She didn't have an appetite either. Could I say incredibly depressed, I wonder?"

"Yesterday?"

"She was asleep. I came, called out and had no answer, and when I came in she was asleep. Today just the same way, the sliding door was opened like that..."

Toshio nodded and urged her on. From the inside of Fuki's body

all sounds had ceased.

"I went to her bedside and called out to her I don't know how many times until her eyes opened. She seemed so much worse than Wednesday, so I said, should we call the doctor, but. Fuki-san said no, after all. If I think about it now, she said it as if in a delirium; I asked about her futon, if it was dirty and such but didn't get any response. But, she very clearly said not to call the doctor. Just that part was very clear."

"I see."

"It was Saturday evening, I think. The hospital was closed at that time, and Fuki-san said no herself, but I thought maybe I should have you come anyway even if she wasn't happy with it, but I thought I should see how she did until night time. She had a fever, but she did drink a few sips of water a couple of times, but she didn't take a bite of the porridge I made, just sleeping away, and I said I'd come again today and left for the night. Then, when I came again this morning, it was like this...."

"How high was her fever?" Toshio asked Tae, mildly irritated.

"It was 38.5 or abouts, wasn't it?"

"This morning, did you touch anything around here?"

No, Tae shook her head. "I called and there was no answer, and she was sort of cold. It didn't seem like she was breathing, so I thought, what has this become. I didn't know what to do! I went to the living room and thought to call an ambulance. But, they say an ambulance won't take a dead person, will they? If I called them and she was dead, there wouldn't be anything they could do, so I thought that I should call you, doctor, but then I thought she seemed dead, but it's possible she isn't actually dead! I wanted somebody to see her but it looked like the house next door was still sleeping, and going through the trouble of waking them up is, well, yes? So when I was thinking that I should ask my daughter, I went in front of Tamo and there was Yuuko-san."

Toshio let out a breath. Why didn't you tell me to look at her

yesterday, why didn't you call an ambulance right away, or why didn't you at least call me yourself? There were things a plenty he wanted to say but saying any of them now after the fact would be meaningless.

"Uhm... Is Fuki-san?"

"Yep, she's dead." he ended up saying a touch coldly. ---It was the same when it was Shuuji. He couldn't suppress his irritation; why did old people these days least so much up to their own layman's judgments? If they're not looking good, why don't you have a doctor see them? Making their own suppositions based on experience, not wanting to bother the doctor, things are going bad around them and they handle it all wrong, all of that in itself just made everything worse. Yes---Murasako Mieko had been like that.

"Yesterday, did she have a cough?"

"No... Not that I noticed."

"Did she use the bathroom?"

"While I was here, she was bedridden."

"Mention any pain, say anything in particular hurt?"

Of course not, Tae said shaking her head. "If she'd said something like that, I'd have called you, Doctor! She had a fever but she seemed to just want to sleep. She said a few things as if she were delirious but, her fever wasn't high enough to be in a delirium, yes? So, she must really be that tired, I thought."

"I see," Toshio mumbled. Breath stopped, heart stopped, blood pressure zero. Her pupils were dilated and didn't contract when a light was shone in them. Rigor mortis was setting in over her entire body stiffly already.

"She died sometime last night. And not too late, either."

She died about twelve hours ago. Right around last night at ten o'clock or so, he thought.

"Oh... that's..."

Toshio moved his face near Fuki's mouth. No particular odor. As far as he could see, on what was visible of her face and limbs there were no particular external wounds or bruises. There were age spots here and there, and a few bug bites caught his eye, a few of them festering. But she did have several edema. Just in case he put his hands in her hair, feeling about but he didn't feel anything like a wound or a lump. Her cornea were not yet opaque. Her arm folded over herself was already completely stiff and couldn't be unwound. Peeling off the top of the futon, he lifted up the lower portion of her night clothes. Fuki had summer underwear on but he looked beneath that too. The skin beneath the underwear was so white it was blue, and postmortem lividity was mild but didn't give way to the touch. So it had been about twelve hours since she died. There were no traces of incontinence in her futon or her bedclothes.

Nothing particularly strange or unusual could be found. At the least, it was clear that she didn't die from an external cause, so the answer to why she died was inside of her. Right now all he could do was guess but last night, the fact that she hadn't gone to the bathroom while Tae was there and yet there were no signs of incontinence meant something vital, he thought.

With her in the condition stated when he'd asked Tae about the last time they'd met, and with no signs of incontinence, it was extreme oliguria, or alternately anuria. Thinking what that meant with the edema, it was possibly renal failure. Guessing by her muddled mental status, he had strong suspicions about it being uremia or hyperkalemia.

Uhm, interjected Tamo Yuuko. "What's happened with Fuki-san?"

"Probably acute renal failure. ...If we do an autopsy, we'll know for sure, but."

"Is that right?"

Yuuko made a complicated expression. She looked like she didn't know whether to smile or whether to grimace. Sadaji looked the same. Most likely everybody was thinking the same thing. Fuki had

just lost her son and her brother and sister-in-law. She herself was aged, and after so many successive sorrows, she seemed rather lost with herself. There was a possibility of suicide that they couldn't discount and, in reality, if she'd died by hanging it wouldn't have been all that much more unsettling.

"Fuki-san was an old girl. And every day it's been so hot. ...Heartbreak must have got to her, huh."

He spoke as if convincing himself. Age, heat, and depression had nothing to do with it; if it was renal failure and she'd been seen right away by a doctor, she might not have died like this, Toshio thought, but ultimately didn't voice.

Gotouda Shuuji, Murasako Hidemasa. Gotouda Fuki. ---All in about half a month.

Toshio left the community of Kami-Sotoba and wiped at a light sweat he'd formed.

The village is surrounded by death...
"....That's stupid."

Just what did he think was happening? Japan had a countless number of them here and there, mountain villages that were in decline and dying out, and this village didn't have one single difference to them. It wasn't some city at the forefront of change. Everything that was here was equally harmless as it was useless. Here---there was absolutely nothing anywhere that made it necessary for anything to happen here. But, Toshio said to himself. "....The bunch of them are getting taken out by the exact same thing."

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Seishin had just spread out his manuscripts when the phone call came. Getting it first before Ikebe who moved to take the phone, Seishin picked up the receiver. From the other end of the line, he heard Toshio's voice, sounding somehow stiff.

"Toshio, is it? What is it?"

Toshio's response was short. "Fuki-san's dead."

Seishin was momentarily lost for words and his first supposition was suicide. This summer, the old woman had lost her son and her brother. It was already the 21st of August and the sun and the wind all had the scent of fall to them. Even now the summer heat remained intense but the signs of a season's passing were clearly on the air. It wouldn't be unusual for an old woman who had suffered many losses to take stock of the past summer. That's what he'd thought.

As if reading Seishin's thoughts, Toshio continued. "But it wasn't suicide. I think it was probably acute renal failure. It was last night. ---I just got back from the Gotouda house. Yano Tae-san from Shimo-Sotoba found her."

Seishin lost his words. Something solid lingered in his throat. His own voice, replying, is that so, sounded like Toshio's, he thought. Ikebe looked back at Seishin with uncertainty.

"After I have contacted the funeral manager, I think that I will be out that way to contact you directly."

"....Got it. Thank you."

Toshio's voice as he said "Later" and hung up the phone was more

devoid of emotion than necessary. Seishin didn't know how to take this news of death. He couldn't say it was a surprise, but that said he couldn't stay calm. Perhaps, he thought, Toshio was the same.

"What's happened?" Ikebe asked Seishin who had hung up.

"It seems that the Gotouda's Fuki-san has passed away."

Eh, Ikebe started then stopped. "That wasn't, possibly...."

"He called it acute renal failure. She passed away last night but it seems she was discovered this morning."

Seeing the expression that rose on Ikebe's face, Seishin felt that Ikebe had the same thought pattern. Mitsuo was just returning to the temple office with Tsurumi; they must have sensed the strange atmosphere, as he asked if something happened. When told that Fuki had died, Tsurumi straight out asked: "It wasn't suicide, was it?" When saying it was not, he looked to Mitsuo.

"...Again, is it?"

An awkward silence hung over the temple office. The lump in Seishin's throat was precisely that. The word "again." This summer, how many reports of death had there been? And in only half a month. Shuuji, the three people from Yamairi, Megumi, Giichi, and this made seven.

"I tell you what," Mitsuo said with a heavy sigh. "It's been that kind of year. Hadn't it been like this before?" Mitsuo said, then wore a strained smile as if realizing something. "Ah, the Junior Monk was still small then, you can't remember?"

"It had been." The one who agreed was Tsurumi. "It was more than twenty years ago, wasn't it? In the rainy season there was a flash flood, and it started when two children were washed away by the riverbed. Back then the incidents continued. There was nothing but accident after accident at the waterfront."

"Right, right, we lost the former head monk that year too, at the beginning of the fall season."

Mitsuo said emotionally; Tsurumi's eyes widened.

"That's, a terribly ominous statement. Mitsuo-san."

"Ah, no---I'm very sorry. That's not how I'd meant it."

Ikebe questioned mildly. "Uhm.... Was what happened with the Predecessor also a water related accident?"

Seishin wore a bitter smile. "No. It was stomach cancer."

Staring at Ikebe's face, who looked like he wanted to say 'that's all?', Seishin felt self-derision in his heart. Yes--that was all it was. Misfortunes, at least in some fashion or other, never ceased. Even if everything which happened was a matter of probability, they didn't happen uniformly. But, unpleasantness left a strong impression on people. People's death, of all things, was the utmost example thereof.

Even if when looking at it in the long term everything went according to reasonable probabilities, it had the impression that it was a strange string of events, and once you had that impression, that preconception's ability to warp reality was striking. Tsurumi had said "accident after accident at the water front," but the reality of it was that Seishin's grandfather was lost to stomach cancer, and while certainly Tsurumi of all people shouldn't have forgotten that, the impression of "accident after accident at the water front" had eclipsed and made hazy his awareness.

Seishin let out a breath. Death occurred randomly. Events occurred in isolation, there wouldn't always be a sure connection. But, people's minds gathered those discontinuous occurrences together and bestowed them meaning, connection. It wasn't that there "was" meaning but that meaning was conferred. For example, constellations; in fact they were merely stars with no relation to anything, between which people agreed on the supplementary lines in order to give the constellations meaning; it was similar to that phenomenon.

The deaths were not serialized, they were just manifesting in a way that left the impression of continuity. Fuki, too, was near

seventy. Already in advanced age, she had made arrangements for her own grave herself, as an old woman who was already having the life slip out of her bit by bit. And further still was the severity of this summer, there wasn't just the intense heat, but the loss of her son, the loss of her brother, making it, for Fuki, an emotionally insufferable summer. Her body would have begun failing even without that, and going through the crisis back to back like that must surely have worn her down. Losing her brother and son surely also had her depressed.

There was nothing particularly suspicious about it, a reasonable death----.

While thinking that never the less, he realized something within trying to convey something to himself.

(But, what?)

Seishin reflected on his thoughts and then found the unease within himself. It was that which he felt when it was Megumi. Something felt very improper about it. The bad premonition he'd had when it was Giichi's time. He was sure to be faced by circumstances that were by no means reasonable or natural, thus all the more reason why he had to eagerly tell himself that it was valid and proper.

(....Is that what it was?)

As if to voice consent to that realization, he felt something queer sinking in his gut. It was Fuki wasn't it, Seishin thought. ---Not Shimizu nor Hiroko, nor even Tokrou. Facing the desk, Seishin remembered clearly the day of Megumi's service. Looking older than their years (It would be best to be prepared), Tokurou and Hiroko. Their backs hunched and rounded like Gotouda Fuki's. Shimizu patting Tokurou's back (as if clinging), his eyes cast sharply down. Huddling together, bearing against the unreasonable shock they'd suffered, the strange sense of dread that could be felt from them.

---When children cry the oni come.

Not Shimizu, nor Hiroko nor Tokurou.

It was Gotouda Fuki.

Yes, Ohkawa Gigorou died, Murasako Hidemasa died, Mieko died. Shuuji died, and Fuki fell to it. There was no sense hierarchy to it. Just as Shuuji fell to death before Fuki did, just as Megumi fell to it. It was just, ---spreading.

Contamination, the word sprung to mind. Sudden, unforeseen death. That death was contaminating nearby relatives.

Shimizu was well. He hadn't heard talk of Hiroko or Tokurou collapsing either. Mieko fell to it, Fuki fell to it. Hidemasa's wife, Shuuji's mother. And Giichi. Those with no resistance, in close contact.

Seishin clenched his fist. ---An epidemic.

Closed off land, a society made up of only those within, intricate regional and familial bonds, the custom of burying their dead.

Once that spread the village would be, beyond a doubt, annihilated.

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Chapter 9 Translation Notes

Chapter 9 - 1

Posthumous names - Honorary Ingou

A posthumous name is assigned to denote one as a follower of Buddha, originally for those entering the priesthood and taking certain vows. Now they are written on sotoba, mortuary tablets and the like to assist in their passing to the next shore, by carrying the honor or good works within their name and having that be what they are identified by so that they aren't lured back to the world of the living when spoken about by their original name, as well as to help them spiritually separate from their former life and material world. The name is assigned by the family temple's head priest or, if one doesn't belong to any particular parish, a monk from the funeral service will assign one. It's generally made up of two characters, and optionally honorary titles such as Ingou, Dougou, Igou, and others varying by sect. There are specific rules as to which characters can be used, determining prefixes and suffixes based on age, gender, sect, etc. as well as denotations written before or after on certain relics, which vary by sect. As there are

quite a few rules in place which require some thorough study to assign titles appropriately, there is a charge, which is the source of some controversy.

Ingou - In is an honorary title consisting of two characters and the third character "in" (院), for temple, put at the beginning of the posthumous name, before the two on a standard name. It's reserved for those who were central to a temple or performing great works for the public good. It was originally reserved for emperors or those of high government houses who erected temples.